Article

Deconstructing the Canon: A Critical Analysis of Select Politically Correct Bedtime Stories

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Abstract: Political correctness has turned out to be a serious concern of postmodern society when it comes to the domain of linguistic application. Language, from its very birth itself, is believed to have retained its influence and social consent by suppressing the 'other.' In philosophical dimension this suppression but attains a positive-relational property called differentiation, which is a quintessential aspect for constructing a binary form at the phonemic all the way up to complex sentence structures. Political correctness is often perceived as a set of semantically engineered novel words for identifying and replacing the existing derogatory and non-parliamentary words in a language. Since, shift in cultural sensibility, facilitated by various external factors, is what one should identify as the cause for this innovative move, literature and especially canons can never be free from its critical-zone. *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, is a collection of 'politically correct' versions of canonical fairy-tales which facilitate a chance for aesthetic humility rather than an insensible criticism, thereby enhancing the participation of readers in the meaning making process. My rationale for the choice of "Cinderella" and "Little Red Riding Hood" from this collection is to analyze the gender stereotyping mechanism operating in these age-old canonical fairy-tales.

Keywords: deconstruction; canon; gender stereotype; political correctness; narratology

Introduction

Literary canons are distinguished by their quintessential resilience over time. This very property of adaptability over spatio-temporal dimension is what makes it superior over other forms of literature. This elite status enjoyed by literary canons often operate as an immunity against critical evaluations, specifically the deconstructive mode of analysis. What makes certain works as canons and 'uncanon' is a matter of serious evaluation, because canons do exert a very serious influence in shaping the public consciousness. Apart from the traditional humanistic way of interpretation, canons must be taken to deconstructive analysis for understanding its mechanism of winning wide social consent. Apart from its widely accepted 'literary merit,' the involvement of cultural politics in the escalation to its heightened position is what this article intends to analyse.

The cultural age of 1960s, is often marked by its spirit of suspicion. Suspicion directed towards all social institutions, often fueled by the revolutionary activities initiated by the Frankfurt School and the New Left. Men like Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer unleashed scathing cultural criticism directed towards all existing cultural institutions, exposing their hidden ideological mechanisms in maintaining hegemony. It was Eric Fromm who, through his work *Escape From Freedom,* proposed the idea of exposing the canonical texts for a litmus test, for identifying its hidden right-wing ideologies. Canons, according this specific group of members, no longer carry any special status which is totally free from any hidden political inclination. In addition, they suggest the involvement of canons in shaping the public consciousness in such a way that its proposed contents are universal and eternal and thereby eliminating the chances of critical evaluation. This sense of universality enveloping these canons helps in hushing-up its exploitative dimension and moreover ensure the active participation of social-beings who are unaware about their involvement in the propagation of certain stereotypical concepts and ideologies.

Political Correctness is a practice of using language intended to reduce and avoid offense and marginalization of certain groups of people who are devoid of social agency due to their historically disadvantaged status. It is often promoted by the Left-wing liberal activists for promoting equality and maintaining social inclusivity. *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* by James Finn Garner is a response towards such practice promoting social inclusivity by spreading awareness among the mass regarding the hidden intentions of certain seemingly neutral and apolitical, 'childish' narratives. Two stories that I have selected for study from this compilation are, one, "Cinderella" and two, "Little Red Riding Hood." Garner pokes fun at certain gender images that people assumes to be universal and biological in nature. He undertakes a dissident reading at these two well-renowned fairy tales and re-presents it in a new manner by deconstructing the patriarchal undertones involved in these narratives. What makes things a matter of serious concern is that, most of these traditional fairy-tales are intended for the kids, which will obviously make the kid biased and intolerant. Garner in fact takes a very serious act through this work making readers aware about the hidden political-incorrectness involved in these tales and ensuring an active

involvement of readers in the meaning making process. He metaphorically 'kills' the author for enabling the 'birth' of the author, making it sound more postmodern in its very style.

In Search of Universality

According to the liberal humanist version of understanding the reason of popularity owned by canonical tales is much consumed by its subscription to universality. But what makes this sense of 'universality' more problematic is that, it is defined in terms of the presence of certain sublime literary styles involved in it. There are two ways by which this proposal of adhering universality with sublimity sounds problematic, one, there is little space reserved for identifying and enjoying such sublime elements by retaining its intended effect by its intended readers, that is, kids. Two, if sublimity is what accounts for the universality of such fairy-tales then they are too judgmental in operation, because dictating things kills the chances of active involvement of kids, which by the way leads only to their limitation of fancy and imagination. This very fancy and imagination is what these fairy-tales is supposed to be generated inside a kid, but whereas according to its political-correct version by Garner, it seems that the traditional version, instead of engendering imagination they foster stereo typification and biased ideas about certain group of people.

There are other defensive stance adopted by people who try to colour it as apolitical and 'innocent.' Subscribing to Archetypal images and Racial-unconsciousness often seemingly add a tone of rationality in their advocacy for the universality of literary canons. They are said to be exploring universal themes of good vs. evil. Archetypes are conceptual patterns used to categorize and understand human behaviors and patterns (Hyde 27), meaning they are not gender fixed. The adherence to racial-unconsciousness as a means for defending the universality of these tales but fails to explain why certain groups, specifically women, are appropriated with roles either submissive or villainous nature. In traditional "Little Red Riding Hood," the 'poor girl' is rescued at the hands of a wood-man who hacks the villainous wolf into two halves. Again, in traditional "Cinderella," a kindhearted prince was needed to be materialized for rescuing the 'poor girl' from the villainous step-mom. Archetypes never entertain gendering human experience, though it adds certain pre-conceived symbols that entertain certain classification, like wolf to villain, dove to heroine, etc.

Universality, according to the New-Left philosophers, is nothing but a bourgeoisie ideology promoting the views of European-White-Male subjects. They are able to win the social consent of the diverse cultural factions by manipulating the existing social institutions through various mechanism that range from colonial intervention to university syllabus furnishing. The New-Left shares a common ground with postmodernism by negating the relevance of metanarrative and its universal applicability. Since political correctness is considered to be an off-shoot to cultural-Marxism, they enrich the postmodern sensibility by exposing the instability of human-essence, that which constitute the notion of universalism. The New-Left tries to stress on the very aspect of contextuality of literature. Context generates text, which means perspective is geographical. The Marxist philosophers invariably criticized the

universality for the very reason that it promoted Western perspective by hushing-up the non-Western. Cinderella is a Western perspective of devising the idea of an ideal-woman. Her white skin-tone, with blonde hair makes her an 'original' form of the innumerous Barbie-dolls, making it as a benchmark for the sense of beauty. Similarly, Little red riding hood is an 'original' form of innumerous submissive women, who takes pride in security offered by patriarchy. People across culture find these stories relatable only because a vast majority of culture, cutting across boundary, is grounded on patriarchy – thus making it a product of ideology rather than certain universal assumption.

For understanding the exploitative dimension of this universal assumption, let's bracket the common elements that underlie in these two traditional folk-tales. Reducing these two narratives into its basic structural narrative, the victim is supposed to be a lady, her quality remains to be the same gullibility, the villain is a wicked woman or a non-human creature, and most interestingly the redeemer in both stories remains to be a male person. Kids who are exposed to these sorts of stories will definitely be formulating the same exact stereotypical imaginations regarding women, and that too, being covered up by the sense of universalism making them believe that this is what is called as 'normal.' This interesting feature of universalism is what is called into question by the New-Left philosophers. Hence, it can be easily be concluded that more than to archetypes what these ideologically driven narratives subscribe to is a gendered version, thus making it a stereotype.

The Birth of Stereotype

According to Vladimir Prop, "functions of character serve as stable, constant elements in a table, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale" (Prop 140). This Proppian interpretation makes it clear that, in a folktale characters are mere structural-narrative spaces and has nothing to do with gender. In other words, imposing certain specific qualities and roles to a specific gender is a product of dominant ideology and by being it covered it under the curtain of normality, people often take them without any proper critical thinking. Judith Butler in her work *Gender Trouble* underscores this same expression through her quote that, "masculine and feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed" (18). A. J. Greimas, a well renowned semiotician, too formulates a similar structural property for folk narratives, often termed as 'actantial' model, but never had reserved any specific role for women in particular. So, the only possibility that can be deduced out from all these propositions on narratology is that, a stereotype is born when certain structural properties or functions of characters (like hero, villain, sender, receiver, helper, etc.) are biologically determined for the propagation of the dominant patriarchal ideology. In short, a stereotype is a biologically determined character.

The involvement of political correctness into these popular folk tales is to deconstruct such deep existing stereotypical images of women, which makes them appear as docile and immature and moreover intending to cover-up such prejudiced notions as normal before the public. In the traditional tale of Cinderella, the Godmother

takes up the role of a fashion designer transforming Cinderella into an 'apt' lady capable enough to sexually win the attention of any men out there in this world.

> Her godmother then touched her with her wand, and, at the same instant, her clothes turned into cloth of gold and silver, all beset with jewels. This done, she gave her a pair of glass slippers, the prettiest in the whole world. Being thus decked out, she got up into her coach; but her godmother, above all things, commanded her not to stay past midnight, telling her, at the same time, that if she stayed one moment longer, the coach would be a pumpkin again, her horses' mice, her coachman a rat, her footmen lizards, and that her clothes would become just as they were before. (Folk Tales 31)

This stereotypical version of identifying a lady as a commodity for the sexual satisfaction of man is the very basis for their subjugated status in the society. Instead of direct and explicit statements denoting sexual demand or desire of men, a vast majority of these sorts of seemingly apolitical fairytales make use of words and phrases that subscribe to the 'beautification' tactics. Looking beautiful here suggests to the sexual demands of men.

Another stereotypical representation of woman usually found in most of the folk tales is that of the victimhood. Women are typecasted as vulnerable creatures who seeks protection at the hands of men. Men attains the status of a 'universal soldier' who is bound to care and protect the women folk out from various crisis into which them fall due to their immature characteristics. Little Red riding Hood is a stereotypical version of this popular concept. Little Red riding Hood, who mistakenly takes the wolf as his grandmother, is rescued from the wolf by a man who was wandering through the forest. The 'poor' little girl's story ends as follows,

> 'Granny, what big teeth you have!'
> 'All the better to eat you with!' shouted the wolf.
> A woodcutter was in the wood. He heard a loud scream and ran to the house.
> The woodcutter hit the wolf over the head. The wolf opened his mouth wide and shouted and Granny jumped out.
> The wolf ran away and Little Red Riding Hood never saw the wolf again. (Folk Tales 55)

The issue here is not regarding the benevolent attitude of the woodcutter. He has done the most daring act of fighting a wolf and rescuing a girl who was left defenseless. Definitely he will be regarded as a merciful creature, possessing a kind heart and great valor, thus making him a perfect example of chivalric culture. But what makes this folk tale a problematic is that, the gendering of specific characters. Most of these narratives place woman as a victim who is threatened by immoral creatures only to be rescued by a man. This isn't the case of mere fictitious folktales, once we expand this perspective a bit further this same style can be identified in many of those religious scriptures when it comes to the event of selecting prophets by the God. A vast majority of prophets selected by the God for redeeming the sinful mortals, falls under the category of masculine gender. This is what constitutes the problematic part of these narratives,

hence devising an alternative version will definitely be a critique on the specific culture as well. Separating such narratives from its universal cover-up and exposing its contextuality is itself a deconstructive act. Context generates meaning, that is once context changes the meaning will also change.

Geography of Vision

What differentiates a Marxist critic from that of a Freudian critic is that, the former defines a literary genius as one who is able to represent his context and the class disparity accurately in a narrative, while the latter identifies a genius as one who is able to translate his inner psychic repressions into a meaningful narrative. Both occupies the two extreme poles of interpretation but finds a common ground in situating themselves against the notion of universality. Marxian interpretation suggests that, context generates meaning. Context is what shapes once consciousness, hence throwing more light into the exposure effect. Exposure drives ones 'conscious acts' in a specific manner! Thus, instead of certain omnipresent and omniscient universal patterns, what Marxists suggest is that, context is what operates as a common ground in making things normal and meaningful among people. Context cannot be limited to mere physical entities, abstract things like culture, religion, ethics, morality and language too occupies this space, and this combined version of both physical and abstract is what I calls as 'geography.' If geography is representational, definitely it has a vision.

Political correctness as already mentioned is a semantically engineered symbolic signification for enhancing the participation of the marginalized. Language plays a very crucial role in devising the human sensibility. According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, "the limits of my language are the limits of my world" (Tractatus 142). According to Richard Feldstein,

> What remains to be established is how the divorce of historical, affective meaning of signifier is part of a process of escalating objectification. Objectification is a psychic as much as a social process. One person (group, class, or nation) may become the object guaranteeing the subjectivity of another (person, group, etc.). In other words, the subject and object positions are relational: one becomes a subject literally at the expense of the other. Moreover and more crucially, the relation between these terms relies on an energetic and affective interchange, whereby the subject is empowered through projecting his, her, or their disordered effects not only on but into the other, who becomes relatively immobilized by this process. (Political Correctness 8)

Here, in these two politically correct versions of "Cinderella" and "Little Red Riding Hood," the author is exposing this very element of social agency enjoyed by patriarchy for dictating the subjectivity of women. In the politically correct version, instead of a godmother, there appears a 'God person, who asks Cinderella that,

> ...So, you want to go the ball, eh? And bind yourself into the male concept of beauty? Squeeze into some tight fitting dress that will cut off your circulation? Jam your feet into high-heeled shoes that will ruin your bone structure? Paint

your face with chemicals and make-up that have been tested on nonhuman animals? (Politically Correct Bedtime Stories 40)

The response from the part of poor Cinderella is, "Oh yes, definitely" (40). The reason why she responded okay to the queries without paying attention to 'god person's' concerns is because she is a subject of patriarchy formulated through the process of interpellation. The author re-represents the traditional benevolent Prince as a sex-maniac, who is driven by his lustful desires for sexually abusing poor girls from downtrodden section of the society. The politically correct version of Cinderella comes to an end when the lust-driven manic men fight each other as 'adrenaline'-animals while Cinderella gets transformed to her earlier form exposing her poor material condition. But, in contrary to the traditional tale she makes-up her mind to stick on with her proletarian style and even dares to sell it as a brand new product showing a sense of woman entrepreneurship and signifies the recognition that woman emancipation can only be attained through self-earned monetary security.

Similar to that of Cinderella, the Little Red riding Hood too represents transition from subjugated womanhood to that of social-agent lady. The interesting part of the politically correct version of Red Riding Hood is when the girl and her grandma admonishes the woodman for his bloodthirsty behavior! It goes like,

> Sexist! Speciesist! How dare you assume that woman and wolves can't solve their own problems without a man's help. When she [grandma] heard Red Riding Hood's impassioned speech, Grandma jumped out of wolf's mouth, seized the woodchopper person's axe, and cut his head off. After this ordeal, Red Riding Hood, Grandma, and the wolf felt a certain commonality of purpose. (Politically Correct Bedtime Stories 91)

The story re-presents the hero, villain, and heroine roles interchangeably in order to facilitate a deeper analysis of what constitutes their cultural meaning might be. Hero is an archetypal figure, but it turns to be a stereotype when it becomes typecasted as masculine-macho-white male. Similarly a heroine is a narrative actantial model, that 'which' is saved at the hands of the 'hero,' which means there isn't any serious demand being made for specific gender affiliation for becoming a hero or a heroine. But heroines are typecasted as actant that can only be performed by menstruating-beings (a poor reductionalist terminology), which is nothing but a normative strategy perpetuated by patriarchy. Here, in this politically correct version of Red Riding Hood, she declares her independence from the seemingly benevolent patriarch and dares to deal her issue at her own hands – a female style of declaration of independence. Both these dissident reading was made possible only because of the changed vision of social sensibility by appreciating a much wider, in fact, a global style of appreciating diverse narratology. Narrative cannot be linear; it cannot be fixed and it should never be a tool for hegemony and this is exactly what political correctness tries to explicate.

Conclusion

Deconstruction of female bodies in canonical fairy tales will give shape to innumerous minor narratives that poses a serious threat to the existing patriarchal

institutions. Fairy tales aren't so fair as it may sounds to be. Just like any other artistic product, fairy tales too is a byproduct of the dominant ideology. It presents itself as apolitical and innocent, thereby ensuring the consent of the public for propagating vulgar and stereotyped images of women. This very tactic of using 'childish' narratives for propagating politically incorrect ideas regarding women must be critically defended and should pave way for the development of a more gender-equal society .

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