

# Sowmya Rajendran's *Girls to the Rescue*: Breaking Patriarchy at its Root

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## Abstract

Keeping focus on the fairy tales, if we trace the historical development of the literary fairy tales, the myth of raising the genre to the stature of being the best therapy in the world for children gets debunked. To our amazement, we find that it has remained strikingly consistent in its principal goal since its origin, that is, to disseminate highly conservative mores and prescriptive code of conduct and internalize specific values and notions of gender. However, the inquisitive and imaginative authors tend to revisit this classical literary treasure by re-imagining it for a new generation of introspective and gender-conscious readers. Though these modern retellings of fairy tales have entered into the literary domain, they are still lagging far behind than their original versions in terms of popularity amongst the masses. The reason for the same is the lack of criticism of these modern retellings. The present paper endeavours to make significant contribution towards this hitherto underexplored area of study by analyzing the riveting retellings of six classical fairy tales from Sowmya Rajendran's *Girls to the Rescue* from feministic perspective.

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Gender inequality comes in many shapes and shades, and sometimes it may also be invisible. Thus everybody needs to be more mindful of gender barriers that may not always be apparent

at first as the victims of male hegemony are none other than one's mother, sister, wife or daughter.

From an early age, boys and girls are channeled into gender appropriate behaviours and physical as well as mental activities by their parents, peer-groups, books, cinema, etc. as they all are themselves the products of patriarchy. The ultimate issue is how to save young children from imbibing rigid gender schemas that restrict not only their lifelong behaviour but also their lifelong learning opportunities. Literature is the best carrier of cultural heritage and thus plays a seminal role in stimulating and nurturing the child's inner resources. Barbara F. Harrison rightly puts in her article titled "Why Study Children's Literature?" when she writes, "...children's early experiences with literature have dramatic bearing on their ability to read, to write, and to begin to make sense out of a complicated world (252)."

However, in the domain of children's literature, the child's predicaments get full credence clothed in rich substance in the classical fairy tales. Though these tales were written long ago, their curative influence has been claimed to be perennial by masters of child psychology like Bruno Bettelheim. Keeping focus on the fairy tales, if we trace the historical development of the literary fairy tales, the myth of raising the genre to the stature of being the best therapy in the world for children gets debunked. To our amazement, we find that it has remained strikingly consistent in its principal goal since its origin, that is, to disseminate highly conservative mores and prescriptive code of conduct and internalize specific values and notions of gender.

It's no wonder fairy tales have retained their charm for centuries as they are re-imagined time and again by the inquisitive and imaginative authors who take this classical literary treasure and re-imagine them for a new generation of introspective readers. The present paper will attempt to compare and contrast Sowmya Rajendran's *Girls to the Rescue* (2015), a finely illustrated retelling of six fairy tales with the original fairy tales from a feministic perspective.

In Soumya Rajendran's "Snow White" from *Girls to the*

*Rescue*, Snow White faced criticism the moment she was born for being extra white, an antithesis to the most desirable requirement in an infant girl. The doctor who saw her first after her birth fainted on seeing her and that she would have been killed by the superstitious people had she not been the princess. In a patriarchal society, where a girl being white-skinned to any degree is a matter of pride and celebration, such reactions surely make us giggle. Generally, mothers get concerned over the dark colour of their daughters and the concern is solely of their marriage. It is really questionable that the skin colour of boys does not matter while the girls' complexion is a feather in the cap of her features. Snow White's mother in Rajendran's retelling rants:

“Where will I find a prince foolish enough to marry the cursed one?” (Rajendran 22)

Here the poisonous apple of the Queen has been replaced by the blessed apple which Snow White's mother gives to her out of concern which is to make her daughter darker as the magic mirror is not telling the name of the prince fairer than her so that she can send her soldiers to find him and marry her daughter. However, her efforts go in vain:

“These will make you darker,” she said, giving them to Snow White. “Be sure to eat every one of them.” But though the apples disappeared by the dozen, Snow White remained as well as the moon. (Rajendran 23)

However, in Rajendran's retelling, Snow White is a girl of strength. She is brave enough to deal with challenges while roaming all alone in the jungles. When she feels some moment in the bushes, she displays her keen analytical power in judging the circumstances. When she hears the dwarfs' voices, she sternly orders them to come out without any fear. When the dwarfs request her to be their queen, she agrees to it without taking permission of her parents. This doesn't mean that she is showing disrespect towards her parents. This reflects her decision making power for her own good. She has no friends owing to her colour. She wants company. So she agrees. She again displays her assertiveness when she decides to meet the prince before her parents meet him so as to convince

him not to marry her as she can't live without the seven dwarfs. At the end, she convinces the Prince to live with her in her parental house as she has promised the dwarfs that she will never leave them. Her confident expression of her desire brings dividends. The Prince agrees to her demand:

“So does this mean you ‘ll leave your home and your friends and fly away on some fancy dragon to live happily ever after?” asked the first dwarf, very miffed.

“Nonsense,” said Snow White. “He’s moving in here.” (Rajendran32)

The craving for a prince charming gets a perfect jolt in Soumya Rajendran’s riveting retelling of “Snow White”. The entry of the prince leads to a riotous laugh as it is a total antithesis of the stereotypical one. The prince is of intense dark complexion who is visible only due to his blazing red cloak. Instead of a white horse, he comes on a flying dragon:

As she stared into the distance, waiting for a horse, she saw, to her surprise a dragon in the sky. And on the dragon sat a man as black as a shadow. It was only by his blazing red cloak that Snow White knew he rarely was there. (Rajendran 29)

The hackneyed requisite for the necessity of a prince to be charming are also subverted in Rajendran’s retelling of “Snow White”. Here Snow White falls in love at the very first sight with the Prince, despite his not so good looks. Rajendran shows that it is the Prince’s honesty and respect for and acceptance of a bold girl which actually make him prince charming:

“And tell me the truth, does not my peculiar colouring bother you?” asked Snow White shrewdly...

“I think it has its own charm,” said the prince, smiling.

“I like your boldness, my queen. And the heat in your black eyes.” (Rajendran 32)

This retelling is successful enough to establish in a short conversation between Snow White and the Prince that a female is competent enough to be a capable administrator. The Prince shares with Snow White the following prophesy made at the time of his

birth, and hence poses his confidence in Snow White's wisdom and prudence:

Staring at the horizon, he continued, "Before I was born, it was prophesied that my queen, who would be of your peculiar colouring, would unite the seven warring kingdoms in her infinite wisdom and rule for a hundred years. For long have I waited to find you, princess. Under your peace, I submit." (Rajendran 31)

In one of the earliest versions of "Cinderella" by Brothers Grimm, Cinderella's smallest feet becomes one of the required traits for being entitled as beautiful. In her crusade to do away with the stereotypical beauty standards, Sowmya Rajendran in her retelling of "Cinderella" from the book *Girls to the Rescue* has made her Cinderella a girl with those much big feet that she never finds a shoe of her size. The reason behind the Fairy Godmother encasing Cinderella's big feet in glass shoes is that she wants everyone to admire Cinderella's big feet:

"I think your feet deserve to be seen and admired," said her godmother. (Rajendran 17)

In this retelling, there is no stepmother. Cinderella has two biological sisters and their parents have died. Cinderella remains busy in household chores. But in the present story, it is her choice. Her sisters don't pressurize her to do all the work. She has herself taken all the household responsibilities on her shoulders and made her sisters lazy and irresponsible. The reason for this choice is her dead mother's advice that those who manage household chores go straight into heaven:

"I thought if I did housework all my life, and if I had no fun at all, I'd go to heaven. God would love me better because of it. That's what Mother always said..." (Rajendran 18)

Even when her sisters ask her to join them in fun activities, she prefers to wind up her homely chores. It's only when the Fairy Godmother makes her understand the concept of sharing of labour in the family that she convincingly orders her sisters to help her in the domestic chores:

“From now on, we’re going to share all the housework,” she said.

“But... You...”

“No arguments,” said Cinderella firmly. (Rajendran 20)

The feminine instinct of impressing the suitable partner is carried forward in Soumya Rajendran’s “Cinderella” though with an amusing twist. When the invitation for the prince’s party comes to Cinderella’s house, her two sisters fancy themselves up so as to improve their attractive prospect to the prince:

The invite came to Cinderella’s house and the two sisters set to work at once. On the big day, they wore their best frocks and, yes, flowers in their hair—wild hibiscuses that grew in the forest. (Rajendran 15)

When Cinderella comes to know about the party through Fairy Godmother, she also wishes to be dressed up in her best. The latter comes to her rescue and with her magic turns her shabby clothes into an attractive purple dress. And there comes the much awaited twist. The Fairy Godmother finds the dress as quite tacky which will surely hinder in Cinderella’s fun and therefore she turns it into a comfortable wear:

“Hmm,” said her godmother. “This looks nice, but it’d be hard to have any fun in it!” So she swished her wand once again and, in seconds, Cinderella was dressed in a pair of practical pants and a fine silk shirt: “Wow,” said Cinderella, hugely impressed. (Rajendran 17)

Departing from Brothers Grimm’s version, Soumya Rajendran’s Cinderella is not a beautiful mute prospect with the only aim to impress the prince. She voraciously eats all the dishes in the party. When asked by the prince for dance, she dances merrily. She chit- chats with the prince and they become good friends in their first meet. It is worth noting that it is not love at first sight. The prince’s behaviour is also appreciable. He gives Cinderella ample space to express her opinions and even appreciates her big feet, thereby, subverting stereotypes of beauty and attractiveness:

“You must have the biggest feet in the world,” said an admiring voice near her. Cinderella turned around. It was the prince!

“Will you dance with me?” he asked.

“Sure thing!” said Cinderella...

“I’ve never had a friend like you!” said the prince.

“Me neither,” said Cinderella, eating the last muffin on the table. (Rajendran 18)

Moreover, it is the prince himself not his servants, who searches the girl wearing the glass slipper. Thus, there is no ostentatious display of power and status on the part of the prince. When he ultimately finds Cinderella, he proposes her to marry him. In contrast to classical version of Cinderella, in this modern retelling Cinderella refuses the prince’s offer as she needs more time to understand him, and consequently take her decision regarding marriage:

“I knew it was you!” shouted the prince joyfully.

“Now, will you marry me?”

“Of course not,” said Cinderella. “But you may join me for dinner tomorrow.” (Rajendran 20)

In this re-imagined tale, Cinderella has no life beyond managing household work which includes scrubbing, dusting, washing and what not:

Cinderella was in the kitchen all day and all night. While her sisters partied and enjoyed themselves, she did the dishes, cooked the food, and did the laundry. (Rajendran 14)

At such behaviour, the Fairy Godmother yells at her for the first time. But this yelling is not to terrify or subjugate her but to sensitize her and shock her out of her complacency into a realization of her individually and her rights as a human being:

“You stand right there and listen to me. You are going to that party and meeting new people. You are not going to waste your life making pancakes for everyone. Got it?” (Rajendran 16)

Till now, Cinderella is following her dead mother’s advice that god loves those who do only work and take no interest in fun.

When she attends the prince's party, her concept of heaven embedded into her mind by her mother undergoes complete change. She understands that living life to its fullest is the only heaven: "I've been such a fool all these days," she reflected... "But here is heaven, now, right here." (Rajendran 18)

Oversetting the regressive tropes of traditional fairy tales, Rajendran's female characters are strong and independent women. Rapunzel's mother is a successful astronaut on her way to the moon. Rapunzel slices off her hair with the prince's sword and uses it as a rope to escape from the tower where her father has locked her for disobeying his order of having long flowing hair. Sleeping Beauty's parents are constantly pressurized to have a child. But her mother overcomes this pressure and spends her time in fulfilling her wish to write a book. Red Riding Hood's grandmother is married to the Wolf who abuses her mentally and physically. She ends her sufferings by killing her abuser. The Princess from "The Frog Prince" doesn't want to get a prince by following the superstitious ritual of her family where a girl gets a prince only after kissing the frog every day. She keeps intact her individuality and self-respect by killing the frog.

Thus, it can be stated that Soumya Rajendran's *Girls to the Rescue* can unhesitatingly be called advancement in terms of overthrowing the myth of stereotypical feminine beauty standards, debunking the legitimacy of submissiveness and domestication of woman yearning only for her prince charming. As a modern retelling, the book does full justice in outstripping the out-dated as well as sexist undertones of traditional tales. In its six re-imagined tales, no girl is left behind to suffer and is made competent enough to change her destiny on her own.

## Works Cited

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