Reconstruction of Hegemonic Gender Beliefs through Fairy Tales: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Nepali Version of "Hansel and Gretel"

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Abstract

Fairy tales are such discourse that influence the ideology of children, who grow up by listening to them. In present technological world, there is high access to digital version of the fairy tales along with Nepali translation. These stories play important roles in constructing gender ideology in children. For this reason, what sort of stories should be accessed to children is a major concern, and how the fairy tales as a discourse communicate and influence in reconstruction of ideology and gender belief is the problem this research focuses on. In this regard, this research aims to explore how discourse of fairy tales reconstructs hegemonic cultural beliefs of gender. This research is based on qualitative method of critical discourse analysis aiming to explore submerged power structures and the role of discourse in reflecting and constructing social realities. Critical discourse analysis has been used to analyse its language, and to explore how language can reflect dominant gendered views and practices. The analysis shows that language used in the story "Hansel and Gretel" is gender biased presenting female and male characters with stereotypical gender roles. It shows biased representation of male and female characters, which contributes to reconstruct cultural gender beliefs. This paper explores the need of recreation of fairy tales with gender sensitive language as they have wider influence on power structures in social practice.

Keywords: Fairy tales, Gender ideology, Critical discourse analysis, Stereotypical gender roles, Cultural beliefs

1. Introduction

Technological advances have provided excessive access to digital world with the access of internet and smart gadgets Ninety-one per cent of the country's population has access to the internet in the country, the Nepal Telecommunications Authority (NTA) says in a report. As per the statistics, most people access the internet on their mobile phones. Mobile internet users comprise 65.68 per cent of the total internet user population. As Republica (2023) states mobile phone access has reached 73.2 percent of the general public in Nepal. According to the full report of the National Census 2022 made public on Friday, 73.2 percent of the common people in Nepal carry mobile phones (Republica, 2023). The increment on internet and mobile users has led to the access of audio visual fairy tales to the kids of Nepal too.

Many English versions of fairy tales have been translated into audio and visual Nepali versions. In this scenario many Nepali children have access to different versions of fairy tales. Fairy tales are the most influencing children's literature, which most of the children are exposed to. These are the bed time stories told by mothers and grandmothers to the children for their entertainment. But these fairy tales are not merely the source and means of entertainment, instead they contribute to construct the gender ideology to the innocent and fragile psyche of the children. According to feminist theorists, fairy tales are loaded with traditional patriarchal ideology with hegemonic gender belief. In feminist theory, "gender designates the aspects of masculinity and femininity that are socioculturally determined, in contrast to sex, which is biologically determined". Fairy tales play important roles in the construction of gender i.e. sociocultural aspects of masculinity and femininity. The stereotypical representation of males as good characters, and females as either evil or weak and submissive characters in the story has wider influence in social context. Children read fairy tales to identify the cultural norms of the world in which they are living. As fairy tales can also be considered as "child's early exposure to gender identity" so the characters should be portrayed as realistic as possible (Kukendal & sturm, 2007).

The narratives of fairy tales exert a noticeable influence on children about the sociocultural ideals of images of good and evil and models of manhood and womanhood (Fisher & Silber, 2000). It is impossible for the readers to read the charming narratives of fairy tales and ignore their capacity for reinforcing stereotypical gender roles and conservative ways of thinking about the roles of men and women. According to feminist psychological theories it is essential for resisting male fantasies because if it is consumed uncritically, young girls' vision of sociocultural roles can be narrowed down. Citing De Beauvour, Fisher & Silber (2000) state that the fairy tales present the demonic

images of the mother not the angelic ones as the good mothers are eclipsed by the entrance of the demonic female character as witch or stepmother.

As fairy tales are not mere the entertaining stories for children, but has the influencing capacity to leave inerasable imprint of hegemonic cultural beliefs of gender, it should be the serious concern to the parents, teachers, medias, academia and other stakeholders of the society in regard of the children's exposure of the children to the fairy tales. The children today should not depend on mother and grandmothers to listen to the fairy tales, but rather they have easy access to the modern smart gadgets with internet services. Furthermore, there is also the access of audio, visual forms of many fairy tales, so the children can easily be exposed to such tales. In this context, this articles aims to analyse the impact of the traditional fairy tales in the tender psyche of the children and suggest for the reconstruction of the fairy tales with gender sensitive language and exposure of children to other types of texts along with the questions against patriarchal gender roles and representation.

2. Methodology

This research is based on qualitative method of critical discourse analysis along with the feminist theoretical framework aiming to explore submerged power structures of gender and the role of discourse in reflecting and constructing social realities. The selected text is Nepali video version of "Hansel and Gretel posted in 2019 August 30 in the link –

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OYRjDiRwwk .

 Critical discourse analysis has been used to analyse its language, and to explore how language can reflect dominant gendered views and practices. According to Fairclough, critical discourse analysis has three basic properties: it is relational, it is dialectical, and it is transdisciplinary. Critical discourse analysis is a relational form of research on social relations, not on entities or individuals (Fairclough, 1995). Fairclough (1995) defines discourse is "a complex set of relations, not simply an entity we can define independently: we can only arrive at an understanding of it by analysing sets of relations, which constitute social life: meaning, and making meaning". Dialectical relations are relations of different entities or objects, for example relation of discourse and power. Fairclough cites Harvey's idea that "power is partly discourse, and discourse is partly power – they are different but not discrete, they 'flow into' each other; discourse can be 'internalised' in power and vice-versa; the complex realities of power relations are 'condensed' and simplified in discourses"(Fairclough, 1995). This research article also aims to analyse the relation between hegemonic power relation of sociocultural context and discourse of fairy tales.

As critical discourse analysis makes analysis of internal relations of discourse by cutting across the conventional boundaries of culture, sociology, politics, linguistics, and so on, it shares the properties of transdisciplinary too. This research is also transdisciplinary as it attempts to analyse the relationship between literary discourse of fairy tales and its influence in the construction and reconstruction of ideology of hegemonic gender beliefs.

As a critical realist approach, it believes in the existence of natural and social worlds; the difference between the two worlds, in which the latter one is 'socially constructed' (Fairclough, 1995). Following the theoretical frameworks for analysing dialectical relations between discourse and power, this article methodologically aims to connect categories and relations such as 'discourse', 'genre', 'recontextualisation' and 'argumentation' (from discourse theory) with categories and relations such as 'power', 'hegemony', 'ideology' and '(from political theory). This paper analyses ways in which discourse is internalised in power relation of gender and power is internalised in discourse i.e. to analyse the dialectical relations between discourse of fairy tales and construction of hegemonic gender beliefs.

3. Discussion

The selected text, Nepali video version "Hansel and Gretel" posted in 2019 has more than 2.5 million views, which suggests the exposure to the fairy tales. The original English version of "Hansel and Gretel" is one of the most popular stories that most of the children around the world grow up by listening or reading. Though intended to entertain the children by providing charming and emotional story of the kids, Hansel and Gretel's experiences, it is not limited to mere charming story. Rather it is loaded with biased representation of males and females, which has great influence on the ideology of its audience in regard of cultural gender beliefs.

This Nepali version of the story has presented the roles of male and female character distinctly, which has reconstructed the patriarchal cultural beliefs of gender. The fairy tales like this can be read "as an exposition of Victorian patriarchal ideology by which girls are prepared for womanhood, so fairy tales similarly reveal the deeply etched, subtle workings of entrenched, cultural artifice that indoctrinates boys and girls to accepted male and female roles" (Fisher & Silber, 2000). According to Fisher & Silber, fairy tales are internalized by young girls at their tender age before they learn questioning tools. The myths about conventional gender roles learned in childhood continue to leave long-lasting imprint on them.

Renowned and full of charm, fairy tales like "Hansel and Gretel" grasp the imagination of individual consumer on a broader, social level and aims to secure the hold of patriarchal cultural

beliefs of masculinity and femininity. This patriarchal beliefs of gender expects males to be powerful, witty, decisive, and so on, whereas females are controlled and expected to be quiet, submissive and timid to accept patriarchal domination. To make this belief hold on, this story has represented female characters either as weak and timid like Gretel, or as wicked and cruel as second wife of the woodcutter (the step mother of Hansel and Gretel), and the old woman (witch). Unlikely to this, male characters, Hansel and the father are presented to be good, intelligent, kind and loving ones. The submissive and timid women accepting the males' power and domination on them are said to be good and idle mother figure, but the women with some voice against patriarchal power are presented as wicked characters, who are rejected even by women. Furthermore, such female characters are presented as the subject to death in the story so that other characters can live happily thereafter. The happy ending of the fairy tales are actually the wish for continuation of patriarchal gender beliefs.

Gender is defined as "a state of being male or female" (Shaheen et al., 2019). This division of gender is based on social and cultural differences, contrasted to biological differences of sex. Many feminist theorists have tried to bring out those gender issues and discrimination that exist in our language and literature, which have long been controlled by patriarchal norms and values. In traditional fairy tales, a good woman is one who behaves submissively and waits for her prince to rescue her while a woman who is having power often portrayed as an evil and ugly character (Neikirk, 2009)."Hansel and Gretel is a fairy tale as it has made use of the magical character like witch and the magical events in the story. The representation of gender ideology through fairy tales or children's literature has become an important phenomenon (Shaheen et al., 2019). Feminists consider fairy tales as a "powerful discourse" that produces gender representation in conventional patriarchal norms and values. Fairy tales are considered as children's early exposure literature with gender discourse. Children reading fairy tales happen to identify those patriarchal cultural norms of the world in which they are living. Then they internalize and develop gender ideologies and follow gender attitudes and responsibilities as expected by patriarchal culture. As fairy tales have greater effect on child's ideology with their capacity to construct and reconstruct hegemonic gender belief, there should be true presentation of both male and female characters so that they can leave gender neutral imprint in child's psyche.

According to Fairclough discourse means the use of , "language as social practice determined by social structures" (Shaheen et al., 2019). Discourse has acquired new meaning when Foucault's famous theory of knowledge and power has brought new meaning of discourse as a distinguishing factor between powerful and powerless, and struggle between oppressor and oppressed is

constantly going on (Siddique, 2014). Those in power use discourse as a powerful tool to control, rule and dominate over the powerless. In this regard, fairy tales have been used by men to control women. So Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis has been used here to analyse this politics of power. As the early version of fairy tales were created by men, they were used as means of transmitting the desired aspects of masculinity and femininity so that patriarchal hegemonic power would be continued.

Though "Hansel and Gretel" has two protagonists, Hansel, the elder brother and Gretel, the younger sister. But these protagonists have not been given equal power to be used to overcome the obstacles of their life. Gretel has her limitations of being younger sibling, and requiring more care, guidance, and protection. She has been presented as a weak character who keeps on crying at difficult situations rather than sharing the guts with her brother. She keeps on following Hansel everywhere. Even at witch's house, she keeps on following the orders of the witch. In the original version of the story, she uses her tricks to kill the witch, but this Nepali translated version has shifted this witty tricks of Gretel to ever witty and strong Hansel. "Gretel's rare role as a strong female character in fairy tales is undercut by the restrictions that surround it" (Das, 2018).

Das (2018) presented the interpretation of the fairy tales and presents the idea that all the fairy tales use the verbs to show the girls; willingness to cry at any trivial situation too. "In Hansel and Gretel, Gretel – cried, wept bitterly, began to cry, cried bitterly (twice), sobbed, flew straight to Hansel, beseeched Heaven for help, fled, while Hansel comforted her, showed them the path" (Das, 2018). The use of such verbs shows that women are very weak and always need the help of men to survive, and men are always intelligent and powerful so that they can help and protect women.

The fairy tales presents the female characters with little or no speech having little power. The voiced ones mostly men with power, skill, strength and wits. Women are their possessions and they regard it is their responsibility to protect the weak women and control and punish the wicked ones. The fairy tales also presents some female characters like woodcutter's second wife and the old woman with voice. But like in many other fairy tales, they are presented as witch and stepmother. The witches cast spells, stepmothers, with their power of speech, create trouble to innocent children. "Neither the virtuous women's silence nor the speech of the evil women can be taken seriously; the formers' silence is to be construed as submissiveness, willingness, and acquiescence; the latter are evil and will meet a bad end (will be silenced) anyway" (Das, 2018). Das (2018) said that "women's voices are drowned out as they are "absorbed into the corporate body of male-dominated decision makers," and hence, the misogyny."

The witches and stepmothers, the wicked foil, are shown to have the power to impede and change the course of the virtuous but weak women's lives. They meddle, speak their minds, make all efforts to make things happen the way they want, and create trouble. The stepmother is always a selfish, controlling, jealous, and mean woman. Good men, like Hansel and Gretel's father, are likely to fall under their influence and harm their own children. The woman appears to be dominant, but she is also evil. Thus, the conflict is also between good and evil. The implication is that a female can be powerful only if she is evil. (Das, 2018). Many critics like Das suggest that fairy tales play a significant role in the socialization of children by influencing the way they understand the world around them. The children identify them with the characters of their gender and try to follow similar attributes of the identified characters of the story. So the messages that children derive out of these tales may have damaging effects on the way children, both girls and boys, see themselves associated with the female and the second with the male (Das, 2018).

Fairy tales implicitly embody a variety of role models, who can have greater influence to the readers. The interactions between fairy tales and life are even more complex, even more powerful and influential than any other form of literature (Rettl, 2016). As fairy tales can have greater impact on its readers, it has been regarded as a powerful discourse that can contribute to the reconstruction of gender ideology. The Nepali version of "Hansel and Gretel", which is recreated in 2019 is even more gender-biased than the original version. Rather than the creation of such version, it should have been recreated with the gender-neutral terminologies and linguistics so that there would have been positive impact of the story to the tender psyche of the children.

Presenting the step mother as cruel woman (dusta aaimai) and father as loving and care taking person of the family taking the responsibility of the family, this version of the story is biased in representing male and female character. Unlike in original version, the stepmother makes the plan to leave the children in the forest in the absence of the father, who had left the house to town for earning for the family. Even the old woman has been presented as the wicked and cannibalistic witch. The women, who are rich and powerful with their ability to make the life as per their wish, are all presented as evil. But such evil women are rejected, punished and compelled to die. Such women, who has the voice and ability to speak and act against patriarchal domination, make their lives independent of males, are never presented as the role models to any other women and girls. Such fairy tales presents women characters in such a way that none of the women can unify to each other. Instead even female character like Gretel is against her step mother and the old woman, and follows the path of her father and brother. They are her role model, and this suggests that she is ready to be quiet, submissive, obedient and patient to patriarchal norms and power unlike the

step mother and the old woman. The ending of this fairy tales with the punishment to the step mother and the witch symbolically suggests the failure of the women's resistance against patriarchy and their compulsion to follow hegemonic cultural beliefs of gender.

The discussion and analysis of the selected text of "Hansel and Gretel" in its Nepali video version suggests for the interpretation of the biased representation of male and female characters influencing the ideology of children in regard of cultural beliefs of gender. It also suggests for the reconstruction of the traditional fairy tales and recreate feminist version of them with gender-neutral representation characters and events so that they can have positive impacts on children. As fairy tales are not going away, the children should be shown the ways they can question the message of the fairy tales at the time they are exposed to the stories, so they can question the validity of the message as they grow (Das, 2018). As parents and teachers we need to expose them with realistic stories, adventure tales, biographies, stories of heroism, of struggle, and so on.

4. Conclusion

The analysis shows that language used in the story "Hansel and Gretel" is gender biased presenting female and male characters with stereotypical gender roles. It shows biased representation of male and female characters, which contributes to reconstruct hegemonic cultural gender beliefs. This paper shows that the representation of males as good characters, and females as either evil or weak and submissive characters in the story has wider influence in social context. The analysis shows that genders are presented in stereotypical ways; males are having authority and violent nature and females are obedient, polite and resisting somehow to save their lives through their intellect and witty tricks. There lacks the true representation of both male and female characters. The good and evil characters along with their success and failure stories should have been presented irrespective of gender. The recreation of the conventional stories of fairy tales should have been done with proper study and analysis. Furthermore, what types of the texts should be exposed to the children should be the concern of all the stakeholders including parents, teachers, academicians, researchers, administrators, policy makers, media persons and many more so that there will be proper exposure of children to the appropriate charming fairy tales and other texts without causing any harm to their psyche.

The findings of this research can contribute to creation and recreation of gender-friendly fairy tales, which constructs egalitarian ideology of gender resulting in lessoning hierarchical power relation in society. It is the responsibility of everyone to think about better future society, for which

children's psyche should not be spoilt with the exposure of violent, biased and misleading texts through easily accessible social medias.

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