

**LITTLE MERMAIDS
SWIMMING IN
THE PATRIARCHAL SEAS**

by

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INTRO

Fairy Tales are known as a part of childhood which are actually also for adults. They began as oral/verbal narrations but also started having an important place in the literary world. Nowadays not only the press but also visual communication media like television and movies have started making the fairy tales sources for their fiction and non-fiction productions. Disney Cartoon movies attract both children and the adults. Fairy tales change their forms and became subjects of lots of film and TV series.

So what is the secret of fairy tales? Why do they not lose their qualities but manage to stay fresh? Tuna Erdem starts her article “Külkedisi’nden La Jaconde’a”¹(From Cindirella to La Jaconde) by describing the fairy tales. The sexual or existential evolution that the child passes through either seems like a miracle of metamorphosis for the child. Fairy tales uses these world of miracles, hiding their properties under its own masks. This process passes both painfully and miraculously for the child who is a candidate for being an adult; who is torn apart from the family and tries to stand on his/her own and discover who he/she really is. Human beings change in their own history as the history of the societies evolve. With every new narration the rules are reproduced again. Because of this the fairy tales are both primitive and up-to-date at the same time. Even though the reproductions have a common quality with the first one, they evolve and change and adapt to the era they are in. Especially patriarchal societies in particular tend to use fairy tales according to these changes.

In this paper, I will attempt to comparatively analyze the different narrative styles of the fairy tale Little Mermaid and the Disney film based on the same story. My goal is to understand an example of how patriarchal communities guide children who are discovering their sexualities; using fairy tales, especially The Little Mermaid which the protagonist in the story metamorphoses both physically and spiritually.

LITTLE MERMAID

I’ve known the story of the *Little Mermaid* as long as I came to know myself. Nevertheless, its effect on me and my friends grew during our adolescence. When we started leaving our home towns and families to going to universities in other cities, starting a new life and learning to stand on our own feet. We were young; there was a new world ahead of us and we were willing to discover this new world. Our overloaded emotions were bursting out

¹ Erdem, Tuna. From Cindirella to Jaconde (Külkedisi’nden La Jaconde’a). Radikal Newspaper Magazine Section, Jan 30, 1999.

with every book we read and every film we saw. As I grew a little bit older and mature, I started figuring out the reasons in a more realistic, rational and analytical way: The fairy tale had achieved its objective. I found out that not only Little Mermaid but all fairy tales were trying to give the socially approved lessons. As people grew from being a child to an adult, passing through many painful phases, they were taught the norms of the society.

Some say that the children meet the fairy tales inevitably as soon as they start understanding the spoken language². They start getting their first impressions of male-female relationships through these fairy tales. They ask "...But, do we learn from these fairy tales an objective lesson on who we are and who others are, or do we learn a rigid lesson on how to fit in, how to oppress, and how we are supposed to behave?" A male child is advised to grow up to be a handsome prince and carry on to be a successful king as the female child to do everything for the man of her house and life.

In her article "Cinderella In The Classroom: Children's Responses To Gender Roles In Fairy-Tales"³, Elle Westland defines fairy tales as changing according to the changes in social structures: "Historical work on the fairy-tale has shown how far its development depends on the dominant value system of the culture that appropriates it." Fairy tales told in the past had the cultural value systems of that society in that time and fairy tales told nowadays, even though they have the same plots, carry the social value systems of today.

The protagonist of fairy tales are mostly female. (like in the *Little Mermaid*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, and many more...) It seems like the patriarchal system was trying to educate women in society to reach its aims. Graham Hammond⁴ thinks that the system determines the role of woman not only in fairy tales but also in mythological stories. "...classic fairy and mythological tales are the examples of how and why a woman's place in the world is too often unappreciated, unrecognized, or trivialized..." We can take this one step forward and say that: the role of woman is constructed with every form of narrative in the societies today, which remain predominantly patriarchal. In today's narrative women are not mostly the protagonists as they did in fairy tales but they get the roles next to the protagonist male character, showing how a woman should act next to and towards a man.

² Hastur. [Wide Awake in Dreamland : Fairy Tales, Feminism, and Patriarchy](http://www.teemings.com/issues04/dreamland.html)
<http://www.teemings.com/issues04/dreamland.html>

³ Westland, Ella. "[Cinderella In The Classroom: Children's Responses To Gender Roles In Fairy-Tales.](#)" *Gender and Education* 1993, Vol 5 Issue 3: 237-250

⁴ Hammond, Graham. [Trading Fins for Feet and Speech for a Soul.](http://webenhanced.lbcc.edu/eng1as/hammondresearch.html) May 28, 2002,
<http://webenhanced.lbcc.edu/eng1as/hammondresearch.html>

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their essay "The Queen's Looking Glass"⁵, analyzes the fairy tale *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* and similar fairy tales in-depth analysis. They say that male dominated literature leads the women to an ideology that they should give up their self-worth and self-concept in order to appeal to the stereotypes of the men in the stories in fairytales leads.

I think these attacks do not only point towards women, but also to men. The male roles and positions are determined, too. Men, also, have to metamorphose from frog to prince. In *Beauty and the Beast*, the male character has to make himself accepted by the female protagonist no matter how ugly and how cruel he is. Nevertheless, at the end of this fairy tale the ugly and cruel man turns out to be a handsome, perfect man who is under the influence of a curse and by a woman. On the contrary of the *Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast* gives its male character a happy ending as a present.

THE FAIRY TALE OF LITTLE MERMAID

Hans Christien Andersen wrote the fairy tale *Little Mermaid*⁶ in 1837. The Little Mermaid was born in a Christian land so it has the properties of the Christian culture all through the tale. In addition, the fairy tale was replete with the information on the sea and the mythological stories based on the sea because Denmark a seaside country and its people earn their lives from the sea. Christianity and the elements of the seaside society are blended into the story as cultural codes.

Little Mermaid tells the story of the youngest daughter of the Sea King who rises up above the water when she turn fifteen as her six elder sisters already did. On her first experience above water, she saves a prince from drowning and falls in love with him. A human being has to love her with all of his heart for her to receive a real soul so she gives her tail and her voice to the Sea Witch in exchange of a pair of legs to earn the love of the Prince. But the prince does not love her back and marries another. Little Mermaid has to turn into foam according to the rules of the system. Her six sisters give their hair to Sea Witch to save the Little Mermaid who has to kill the Prince to go back home. But she cannot kill the Prince. The Air Fairy raises her and blesses her as she was going to turn into foam. The Little Mermaid is saved in exchange for her good deeds.

⁵ Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. "The Queen's Looking Glass." *Don't Bet on the Prince*. Ed. Jack Zipes. New York: Routledge, 1986. 201-208.

⁶ Andersen, Hans Christian. "Little Mermaid". *It's Perfectly True and Other Stories*. Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1938. 29-56

The fairy tale starts with descriptions of the Sea Kingdom. Andersen uses the most magnificent objects from earth for the patriarchal Danish society to describe the wonders of the undersea: Churches and their steeples. He tells that "...it is very deep- deeper than any anchor cable can fathom; many church steeples would have to be piled one on top of the other to reach from the very bottom to the surface of the water."(pg 29) The first character the reader meets is the Sea King who is a strong male character. After the Sea King, reader meets with the mother of the king, the Sea Queen who carries twelve oysters on her tail as a sign of her nobility. From the beginning, the values of nobility in the male dominated Christian world is told to the young women as the target audience who will soon reach the age of marriage.

In the fairy tale, we learn how the elder sisters meet with the sea surface and their experiences before we learn about the Little Mermaid. Every one of these girls passing through adolescence chooses a different spot to rise up above the sea according to their own personalities and their experiences develop according to their choices. The oldest sister likes the churches and the sound of the church bells the most in her experience of top of the sea. The second one describes the beauty of the sunset. After the importance of the Christian culture is underlined, the natural beauties are blessed. Every mermaid passes through this experience and they all narrate the beauty of their experiences which before they were afraid of and tried to avoid but also curiously expecting. This metamorphosis really reminds the change of a girl into a woman. The important of all, that all the elder sisters get used to the idea of visiting over the sea and they lose their interest of it when they marry one of the sea folks and settle their lives under the sea. They became good wives to their husbands and wonderful mothers to their children. Outer world becomes trivial and they set up a life as the women of their home.

The Sea Queen, grandmother of the Little Mermaid, prepares her before her first rise up above the sea attaching oysters as jewelry on her tail. The oysters hurt the Little Mermaid a lot. The Sea Queen explains: "Well, one must suffer to be beautiful" (pg 35) A woman should be noble; dependent to her religion, husband and children but over all she should be beautiful. She should do everything to be liked by her man. She is not only dependent to one man as an object of desire, but to rules of all the men in the society. She should be beautiful. and skilled to have her man honored between the other men. Looking at the entire fairy tale, Little Mermaid may seem doing what the patriarchal system wants her to do but she has a rebellious side, too. (The dramatic structure of the narration is created by these contradictions.) She wants to be with the man she chooses. She does not want to wear some show-off signs of nobility because she is hurt by them.

The Little Mermaid sees a nice sunset when she first rises over the sea. Then she sees a ship full of people having fun. Between them, there is the young and handsome Prince. Fireworks of the celebration represent waves of the overloaded and complex feelings of the Little Mermaid. The undersea starts to seem darker as the oversea brighter. The sun she was searching for was over the sea. And the Prince was the son of the brightness, noble and sixteen year old of the bridegroom candidate.

She saves the Prince and lands him onto a bay which has a monastery in it. Little Mermaid swims back to the sea when she sees the girls from the monastery coming. As if the fairy tale saying "Everybody should be with his/her appropriate partner." The girls running from the monastery's garden – which can also be called the garden of life- deserves to marry the Prince. The garden symbolizes fertility as the monastery symbolizes morality.

As a result, the Little Mermaid decides to give up her voice and tail to win an immortal soul. She gives up her most precious part, her tail, trying to be the woman the Prince would love. Also she gives up her voice which symbolizes her freedom; her right to speak. No matter what she does to win the Prince's love, the Prince marries another girl. Little Mermaid's last test gives another lesson. To have herself back, she has to kill the Prince. She can not do it. The reason is not written clearly in the tale. Is it because of "love": that she does not want to lose him? Is it that she is "noble": that she could not kill another living being? Or is it because she accepts the fact that she has already lost everything she has? By either way it is thought: Do not behave badly. Behave nice and nobely, no matter what you may lose.

Hans Christian Andersen saves the Little Mermaid from dying or becoming foam with the Air Fairy, thus avoiding a sad ending. The story about the Prince concludes as the theme appear: the good deeds of a person will always be rewarded. A young girl should be beautiful, nice and good. This escape seems like the end of the film *Thelma and Louise* or *Butch Cassidy ve Sundance Kid's*. The audience never gets to see the protagonists die because the frame freezes. They make them live in their minds and do not feel sad for their death. It is the same with the fairy tale of the Little Mermaid. The reader does not feel sad thinking she has lost her love and turned into foam but feels relieved by learning that she will win an immortal soul if she carry on her good deeds for 300 years more.

DISNEY'S LITTLE MERMAID

Even though the film is adapted by the fairy tale it has many differences with the literary work. Characteristics of the 1989's film's target audience has changed. It is a time where fairy tales are welcomed as productions for children so for also the film, the target audience was primarily composed of children. Naturally there are lots of differences between 1837's children and 1989's and what are expected of them. Even though some values stay the same (like being a nice, beautiful woman who is loyal to her man) their qualities change. Today's young girls take Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and Ally McBeal as their examples. These women portray a very difficult example to reach with their physical characteristics such as their thinness, operationed bodies. On the ethical side, they show that a woman is succesful when she directs her man. They do not mind making themselves "object of desire"s to rule their men. At the time the fairy tale was written, a girl's task was to be a good housewife, looking after the children and making her husband happy. In the 1990's a woman's task changes into looking beautiful because this way she can earn power and rule her man. And to be beautiful in every way seems blessed. As a result something in the fairy tale *Little Mermaid* has not get much attention finds a very important role for the women living in today's patriarchal society. The Little Mermaid's suffer through loosing her tail and getting a pair of legs for her man turns out to be a reality in the life of modern women as plastic surgery.

Looking at the history of Disney's films it can easily be seen the the change in the target audience in time from the differences in the narrative styles and changes of the contents. In Disney's first film, *Snow White and Seven Dwarves* (1937) Snow White wonders around with her pure white face taking all the responsibilities for cleaning the house of the dwarves and treating them as her children. She spends all her life waiting for a man she never knew to rescue her. Finally the prince shows up, saves her and takes her to happiness. In 1950's *Cindirella*, Cindirella cleans the house and cooks all through the film. Her only wish is also to marry a man she has never met. 1958's *Sleeping Beauty* does nothing different from her friends. She also sews, cleans around and waits for the man she never knew.

Little Mermaid portrays a slightly different character from her friends being a little more rebellious, doing what she wants. In the film she loves a man she knew more according to the fairy tale version. The Prince has some charming qualities such as caring for living creatures (his dog). He seems like a good person. Still we have to admit that Prince Eric is

also a stereotype. The film takes one step forward than the fairy tale, covering the appropriate role of the candidate of the patriarchal society man. "Men must be strong, bold, and willing to inflict themselves on women to win them. Women must be beautiful, self-effacing, demure, and charming if they hope to land a man and marry him after a long engagement."⁷ We never see Prince Eric's mother and father and realize that they are dead. Eric has to marry someone as soon as possible to carry on his generation and to save his kingdom. Today, it is expected from a male child to grow up to be a nice man, find an appropriate wife, have a good job and finance a beautiful house.

The film also opens with a vision of the male world. The scene begins with the sailing of Eric's boat. Instead of narrating the undersea as it does in the fairy tale, film starts telling the conditions of the ground people at the sea. All the people on the boat are male. As the credits start, we go down under the sea and we encounter some seapeople and they are also male. From the beginning the film describes its world: Male land people.

In the film *Seawitch* Ursula takes the part of the noble Grandmother as importance. An old woman is portrayed as using devious plots to gain power more than by being noble. When maturity and wisdom come as characteristics of a woman, it is evil. We meet Ursula putting on a make-up as if she is telling Ariel to make herself beautiful for men. The side character Sebastian who is a male is always telling Ariel to behave appropriately. The end of the film also differs from the fairy tale. Bad, evil, old witch is punished as the appropriate bridegroom candidate shows how he will care for his wife to his father-in-law.

Sandra M. Gilbert ve Susan Gubar describe this sort of behavior as "inanimate objet d'art," which means turning "killing into art", when a woman is stripped of what makes her unique in order to become an object of desire for men. They find similarities of the patriarchal aspects of Anderson's "The Little Mermaid" with the Chinese practice of footbinding. Woman creates herself again to conform male dominated and defined sense of beauty and loses her own identity.⁸ Why are her tail and her voice taken from the Little Mermaid? Why not her arms or her eyes? In China, footbinding was a tool of social control in a male dominated society. Fan Hong suggests that it is a symbol of the castration of women which Chinese civilization was unique in permitting. Chinese women could not move fast because they felt pain. So they could no longer escape from danger as quickly as they previously could have.

⁷ Hastur. [Wide Awake in Dreamland : Fairy Tales, Feminism, and Patriarchy.](http://www.teemings.com/issues04/dreamland.html)
<http://www.teemings.com/issues04/dreamland.html>

⁸ Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. "The Queen's Looking Glass." [Don't Bet on the Prince.](#) Ed. Jack Zipes. New York: Routledge, 1986. 201-208.

This creates a social control over women. Chinese women were not only expected to torture themselves, but were also forced to subject themselves to this form in order to be viewed as attractive by their society. Just as the Little Mermaid was forced to accept legs in order to be seen as desirable in the world of the prince, no matter how painful it is to her. So the woman does not think it is painful and it hurts her but thinks that she does for beauty.⁹ Nowadays lots of women can be heard talking about how painful it is to be beautiful. It is the same with the Little Mermaid. In order to be accepted by the society she wants to get in she has to have a pair of legs instead of a tail.

Her tail is not the only thing Little Mermaid gives up for her man, she loses her voice, too. Being “voice”less can be translated as not having the right to speak. She can not talk and she fills the eye with beauty. In other words, she is an object to be displayed and desired. In a patriarchal society, what mere can be desired from woman? This way Ariel, the Little Mermaid turns into an object of desire appropriate for a cinematic role model.

CONCLUSION

Narrations imitates life itself as human kind creates new experiences from old narrations. Stories use real life as their raw material. Stories help us combine our own experiences and the experiences they submit into new feelings and thoughts to lighten up the dark roads we have to pass through in the future. Because we live in patriarchal societies the narrations shape us the way they want us to be.

⁹ Hong, Fan. "Footbinding: Sexuality, Security and Social Control." Footbinding, Feminism and Freedom: The Liberation of Women's Bodies in Modern China. Ed. J.A. Mangan. London: Frank Cass & Co., 1997. 45-50.