

**SYSTEMIC BARRIERS AND
NARRATIVE RESISTANCE:
A STUDY OF *AND THEY LIVED EVER
AFTER: DISABLED WOMEN RETELL
FAIRY TALES***



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in
partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
MASTERS OF ARTS in English Language and Literature*

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project entitled "Systemic Barriers and Narrative Resistance: A Study of And They Lived Ever After: Disabled Women Retell Fairy Tales" is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Ms. Lissy Jose, Assistant Professor, Department of English, and that no part of the dissertation has been presented earlier for the award of any degree, diploma, or any other similar title of recognition.



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CERTIFICATE

I hereby declare that this project entitled "Systemic Barriers and Narrative Resistance: A Study of *And They Lived Ever After: Disabled Women Retell Fairy Tales*" by Benazir Baiju is a record of bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.



Ernakulam

March 2025

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Introduction

Psychologists agree that the formative years of children are the ages of one to nine during which they acquire the ability to imbibe values and act in accordance to them. It is crucial to assess the type of values that are ingrained in minds of these children, many of which will shape their view of the world and which will be carried forward into their adult lives. 'Children's literature' and by association fairy tales are the primary modes of instruction and entertainment that enrich children's lives and in turn influence how they interact with the world and how they reinforce the stereotypes that are perpetrated in the stories they are introduced to when they are little. Fairy tales in particular, cater to the imaginative tendencies of children and offer an extremely fantastical medium for children to engage with. Many cultures throughout the ages have used the didactic nature of fairy tales and the lasting impression they create on young minds through their portrayal of a fantasy setting, fairies and magic in the form of a tool to manipulate the notion of good and evil in the psyche of young children.

The classification of a text as "Children's Literature" or "juvenile literature" is a relatively new phenomenon and emerged in the eighteenth century. The reason for such late emergence is not because of the lack of children's literature pre-dating the eighteenth century, but because children's literature manifested itself mostly in oral traditions and songs in the form of fairy tales and folk tales. Children's fiction has existed well beyond the fifteenth century. Another reason for late identification of children's literature is due to the boundaries between children's literature and adult fiction being more 'blurred' rather than 'concrete' prior to the eighteenth century resulting in a classification crisis. Children's fiction was inherently always moralistic in nature, often representing puritan

or religious values in their fifteenth century actualizations and transforming into philosophical and scientific narratives with regards to morals perpetrated by philosophers like John Locke and Charles Darwin in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The popularity and publication of Children's Literature peaked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century resulting in that era being referred to as the 'Golden Age' of children's fiction. Due to the latent ambiguity that made it difficult to divide children's fiction and adult fiction into two categories, earlier children's literature was extremely gory. This uncertain distinction between the two leads to children being read stories for adults which were inherently more violent in nature. This was the case with the Brothers Grimm who were known for their rendition of popular fairy tales like *Rapunzel*, *Snow White*, *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Sleeping Beauty*. In the Brothers Grimm's tales, the sleeping beauty is raped by the prince that comes to save her, the prince in the story of *Snow White* engages in necrophilia with the dead Snow White and finally in the story of *Rapunzel*, the prince is blinded by thorns as a result of being pushed off the tower by the witch. These versions of the Brothers Grimm's tales were written in a toned-down version as compared to the original oral folk tales that were told to children of the past filled with death, murder, violence and rape.

Popular actualizations of Children's fiction significantly differ from their original source material or 'ur' text. 'Ur' texts are stories that exist in the collective consciousness of people. Different cultures across the world have different 'ur texts' or different actualizations of different fairy tales. For example, in the Indian context, folk tales or fairy tales are referred to as Panchatantra Tales, in the Arabian context they are referred to as Qasas al-Atfal (Stories for Children), in Russia, they are referred to as Detskaya

Skazka, in the Japanese context, they are referred to as Minwa and in the German context, they were referred to as fairy tales by Brothers Grimm. Every actualization of the different fairy tales differs in structure, content and moral principle put forward, but they all essentially do the same thing which involves teaching children values and shaping their idea of society. Compared to their previously gory counterparts, present day fairy tales are sanitized versions of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales. The pioneer who revised these previously violent fairy tales and reproduced sanitized versions is Disney. Disney sanitized the gory beginnings of fairy tales and made many changes to the plot structure and characterization of the prince, princess and the witch. Currently, the Disney version occupies a larger space in popular imaginations due to their revolutionization of the Disney characters, the most famous of which is the 1937 version of *Snow White* wherein the passive princess Snow White with skin as fair as snow and lips as red as cherries, lies in wait for the prince that can break her curse of death with a kiss. While the lack of immense violence has been removed, Disney's version of fairy tales with conventionally attractive princesses, princes with savior complexes and witches with hunchbacks however is not free of fault because it perpetrates a notion of beauty, normalcy and ableism that often goes unnoticed under the overarching theatrics of the movies.

The portrayal of beauty and monstrosity with respect to the characters in fairy tales results in children starting to engage with the concept of beauty and aesthetics at a young age. A child who does not look like the fair 'Snow White,' who does not have long hair like princess Belle and who is not passive like the other princesses will be exempt from a happy ending. The children who have features akin to the 'witch' like moles, curly hair, hunched backs, and long crooked noses begin to see themselves as evil, as monsters

or as 'undesirable.' They are "othered" or perceived as 'different' from the original norm of beauty present in the fairy tales. Fairy Tales are inherently didactic in nature with the ability to police what is inherently beautiful and what can be characterized as monstrosity.

This project problematizes the meticulous construction of beauty, normalcy and monstrosity in Fairy Tales and Children's Literature while also dismantling stereotypes of desirability and undesirability with respect to the characterization of fairy tale characters in the present-day scenario of fairy tales. The project uses the Social Model of Disability studies which propagates the idea that impairments are not inherently disabilities, but are made to be disabilities by society and the social structure which constantly 'others' or discriminates against individuals who are different from the norm perpetrated by the fairy tales. The main objective of this project titled *Systemic Barriers and Narrative Resistance: A Study of And They Lived Ever After: Disabled Women Retell Fairy Tales* is to question the ableist perspectives perpetrated through fairy tales by analyzing the anthology titled *And They Lived Ever After: Disabled Women Retell Fairy Tales*. This text written by thirteen disabled women, re-imagine fairy tales from the point of view of persons with disabilities. It critiques the exclusionist narratives of fairy tales which fail to portray or include persons with disabilities in a positive and inspiring light. The anthology is titled *And They Lived Ever After* because it seeks to subvert the traditional fairy tale notion of a 'happily ever after' because in reality, 'happily ever after' is an illusion. The overtly positive narratives of fairy tales set children up for failure and the blatant erasure of disabled children further the problem.

The first chapter of the project introduces the theoretical framework by which it will be analyzed. The anthology *And They Lived Ever After: Disabled Women Retell Fairy Tales* is analyzed based on the Social Model of disability studies which sees disability as arising out of social prejudice, neglect, and stigmatization. The second chapter of the project analyzes the anthology as a pioneering force in dismantling stereotypes in fairy tales. The chapter also critiques the construction of and definition of 'normalcy' and 'beauty' in fairy tale narratives. The third chapter reconsiders the idea of "disability" in an ableist society wherein impairments are made into a disability by society due to their refusal to become inclusive.

Chapter 1

Introducing the Different Models of Disability Studies and the Concept of Ableism

Prior to defining the concept of 'disability studies,' it is of utmost importance to track the origins of the very term, 'disability.' The term disability has been defined in myriad ways over the years because of changing societal attitudes, advancements in medicine and the evolution of political movements and laws. In the ancient past, disability was seen as a sin, divine punishment or as a curse. As society evolved and with the advent of science, disability began being seen as a biological defect that had to be cured. This resulted in disabilities being stigmatized, leading to the alienation and exclusion of persons with disabilities. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, disability is "a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions" (Webster). This is more so a contemporary definition of the concept of Disability. Before the 19th Century, the concept of being disabled implied being disadvantaged by laws that prevented access and participation in some areas of a community's political, economic, and social life (Leslie and Silvers).

The concept of "disability" has various actualizations and interpretations, each created for the specific program and policy that makes use of it. How we perceive and understand disability shifts based on the methods that are used to learn about it and the contexts in which it is considered (Leslie and Silvers). There are primarily three different models used to analyze the concept of disability with respect to the perceived causes of disability and appropriate responses (Olkin). The first of which is the Medical Model.

This was popularized in the early 20th century. Before the 1970's, disability was seen as a defect or an innate biological issue. It was an impairment that needed to be "fixed" or "cured" and could be of the physical or mental type. This model believed that disabilities required rehabilitation or intervention from Medical Practitioners who believed that they were "incurable." This ties in with the Charitable Model wherein people with disabilities were seen as 'pitiful' and in need of help. The Charitable Model propagates the notion of people with disability being unable to function by themselves and in constant need of help and support. The Charitable Model paints disabled people and individuals who evoke sympathy and pity. Due to its innate nature of seeing persons with disabilities as in need of help, they often relegate disabled people as non-participating members of society. The Model encourages charity in the forms of fund raisers and charities, often ignoring the real problems that result in individuals being disabled like lack of good infrastructure and the exclusionary nature of society which prohibits them from becoming active members of society.

The 1970's on the other hand, gave rise to the second model which focused on disabilities as being reflective of social barriers created by society. This resulted in the conception of the Social Model. The social model perceived disability as an aspect of an individual's identity, akin to race, gender, and the like. According to this model, disability is a result of a mismatch between the disabled person and their environment, in both the physical and social realms. The barriers and handicap that plague a disabled person are a result of the environment, not the disability. This model vouches for a change in the way of addressing disability wherein the environment and society must change, instead the people with the disabilities. According to the social model, the only way to change the

environment is through full inclusion and the elimination of discrimination, negative stereotypes, and oppression (Olkin).

“Following the UPIAS “social definition of disability”, in 1983 the disabled academic Mike Oliver coined the phrase *social model of disability* in reference to these ideological developments” (Oliver and Sapey). The UPIAS is the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation. It came into existence in 1942 and tried to vouch for the rights of persons with disabilities. “Oliver focused on the idea of an individual model (of which the medical was a part) versus a social model, derived from the distinction originally made between impairment and disability by the UPIAS” (Sapey and Michael). “Oliver’s seminal 1990 book *The Politics of Disablement*” (Oliver) “is widely cited as a major moment in the adoption of this model. The book included just three pages about the social model of disability (Oliver).”

The Third Model is the Cultural Model. “The term was first used by Patrick Devlieger (2005). The author spoke in favor of a creation of a cultural model of disability as a multiple model, i.e., allowing research on disability on three levels – the individual, society, and culture. According to Devlieger, extending the scope of the current research is necessary because disability is an integral part of culture” (Twardowski, 52). The Cultural Model believes that disability must not be treated with respect to social discrimination or medical pathology. But instead, must focus on “seeing impairment as “potential materiality” that can be embodied in the body, resulting in pain, discomfort or inability to perform certain activities, but it may also lead to social discrimination against the affected person” (Twardowski, 52). The cultural model celebrates disability as a cultural phenomenon and not a deficiency. For example, Deaf Communities celebrate

deaf culture and do not consider it a disability or deficiency. Places like Chicago and New York conduct Disability Pride Parades to celebrate diversity.

“The basic drawback of the social model was the rejection of the relationship between impairment, i.e., the physical state of the organism, and disability being the effect of oppressive treatment by the social environment. Thus, it can be said that the cultural model of disability breaks the impairment-disability division, because it sees both biology and culture “as factors remaining in mutual relations, also in conflict” (Plichta, 2017, p. 24) (Twardowski, 53).

These three models acted as catalysts and gave rise to other models like the Charitable Model and the Human rights model, both of which address the condition of disabled people in society with respect to oppression and the formation of human rights laws. The Charitable Model largely aligns with the Medical Model wherein persons with disabilities are seen as ‘different from the norm’ and in need of help and correction. Whereas the Human Rights Model vouches for the equal treatment of disabled persons within society and stresses the importance of equal rights for all people. While the Charitable Model and the Medical Model seek to exclude, the Human Rights model strives for the empowerment of persons with disabilities.

When discussing Disability, the concept of “Ableism” must not be left out of the conversation.

Ableism is the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. At its heart, ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require ‘fixing’ and

defines people by their disability. Like racism and sexism, ableism classifies entire groups of people as 'less than' and includes harmful stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalizations of people with disabilities (Eisenmenger, 2019).

Ableism propagates an extremely negative perception of disability. It idealizes the concept of being non-disabled as normative or 'normal' and views disability as an abnormality or flaw (Villines, 2021). "It is a form of systemic oppression that affects people who identify as disabled, as well as anyone who others perceive to be disabled. Ableism can also indirectly affect caregivers" (Villines, 2021). Ableism is something that often goes unnoticed because it develops either consciously or unconsciously as the individual interacts with societal notions of disability. It is a bias that is often implicit and is commonly seen against disabled people (Villines, 2021).

Ableism manifests itself in many ways and occupies many tiers of the society including the Institutional level, the Interpersonal Level, and the Internal Level (Villines). With respect to the Institutional level, it manifests itself as Medical Ableism and can be tied to the Medical Model which believes that disability is an inherent biological flaw that must be fixed with the help of medical practitioners. At the Interpersonal Level, Ableism manifests itself in social relationships. An example of which is a father trying to fix her daughter's disability rather than trying to accept and embrace it. At the Internal Level, Ableism manifests in the subconscious of an individual, leading the individual to believe in problematic notions about disabled people perpetuated by the society (Villines).

Within these three levels, Ableism also takes many different forms. The first of which is Hostile Ableism which manifests as derogatory and violent behaviors towards

disabled individuals such as name calling and bullying. The second form is Benevolent Ableism which can be tied to the Charitable Model, wherein disabled individuals are seen as weak and in need of rescuing or saving. This results in a loss of agency and individuality for the disabled person. The third form is Ambivalent Ableism which is a result of the culmination of Hostile Ableism and Benevolent Ableism wherein a disabled person is treated as weak and vulnerable at first but is met with aggression upon rejection the "charitable" front put on by ableist individuals (Villines).

A few examples of Ableism include the usage of Ableist language, wherein able-bodied individuals use words like retarded, crazy and OCD without regard. Ableism also manifests itself in architecture with respect to 'inaccessible designs' when constructing buildings. This can be seen in society as a "lack of ramps" for wheelchair users in schools and malls. And sidewalks that have cracked concrete impeding on smooth movement and resulting in instability. Ableism manifests itself in Education with regards to untrained teachers discriminating against dyslexic students, blind students, and deaf students. Ableism also manifests itself in Employment wherein employers show preference for able bodied workers over disabled persons because of they believe that disabled people cannot perform or work at the level or capacity of able-bodied individuals (Villines). From these different actualizations of ableism, it can be surmised that Ableism is the underlying current of modern society. It is often unseen but its effects are extremely potent.

The impact of Ableism is such that it "affects everyone. It shapes how people think about physical or mental differences, which anyone can acquire during their lifetime. It also damages society as a whole by reducing access to transport, education

and the internet, increasing levels of unemployment, increasing poverty and fueling bullying, harassment and violence" (Villines).

Ableism can be thwarted by Anti-Ableism which is a process by which individuals actively work towards dismantling ableism. "It begins with recognizing that ableism exists, that it causes serious harm, and that nondisabled people benefit from this system. This is known as privilege" (Villines). Anti-Ableism can be practiced by learning about disability and how it impacts individuals, researching about the concept of Ableism, the history of disability studies and the types of Ableist Stereotypes (Villines). Ableism can also be combatted by letting Disabled individuals speak for themselves. This reasserts their sense of agency and grants them the autonomy of creating their personal narrative.

Fairy tales are staunch proponents of Ableism. They indoctrinate dangerous perspectives of beauty and canonize able-bodied individuals as people deserving of love and in retrospect, 'a happy ending.' Fairy Tales present disabled people as the villains or characterize them as deserving of pity and charity. This is seen in the case of the "Witches" shown as hunchbacks and characterized as ugly and evil as a result of their deformity. Fairy Tales propagate Ableist beliefs and indoctrinate children by making them believe that disabilities make you unlovable and evil. Fairy Tales perpetuate the notion of disabled people having no space to exist in an able-bodied society instead of being a proponent of a society that caters to all people. The text, *And They Lived Ever After* places the agency of narrative onto disabled individuals. They become the authors of their own stories. The text is a re-telling of Ableist Fairy Tales and plays the role of revisionist literature which promotes inclusivity and redefines disability as something that

is socially constructed rather than being a biological hindrance. It critiques the construction and definition of 'normalcy' and beauty in the space of children's narratives. The text is a proponent of Anti-Ableism that teaches children to perceive disabled people as human beings with emotions and goals. The text sees disability simply as a difference in a world where everyone is unique and different in their own way. This project adopts the perspective of the social model. The stories in the collection *And They Lived Ever After* are analyzed to find how they dismantle popular stereotypes in fairy tales and critiques the construction of and definition of 'normalcy' and 'beauty.'

Chapter 2

Visibility and Validation: Rethinking Beauty and Disability in Children's Narratives

A fairy tale is a story, often intended for children, that features fanciful and wondrous characters such as elves, goblins, wizards, and even, but not necessarily, fairies. The term "fairy" tale seems to refer more to the fantastic and magical setting or magical influences within a story, rather than the presence of the character of a fairy within that story. Fairy tales are often traditional; many were passed down from story-teller to story-teller before being recorded in books (Fairy-Tale).

While fairy tales may at first, seem fairly simple and harmless, the underlying implications of the stories, inclusive of its plot and characterization change and shape the world view of children. Fairy tales and classic stories are inherently didactic in nature and strive to enforce certain social norms as seen in society at the time of their writing. Children are gullible and naïve, often prone to being easily influenced. Fairy tales, through their flowery language, false promises of happy endings and presentation of a clear dichotomy between what is good and what is bad, can be extremely pernicious to children. The biggest offender to the negative characterization of disabled people is the Fairy tale. As it does not simply present a certain world view to adults who can decipher what is being said to them. But instead, targets young minds and makes use of their innocence to normalize tenets of ableism and facilitate discrimination through characterization. The narrow world view of Fairy tales which promote ableism over focusing on the social effects of discrimination against disability is the reason for the

presence of disabled characters in the text *And They Lived Ever After*. The text serves as an Anthology that retells fairy tales from the perspective of disabled people. This ensures that disabled people will not be an 'absence' in the fairy tale space. It also resists against the blatant erasure of disabled people from the Fairy Tale sphere. When speaking of fairy tales, the concept of othering cannot be ignored. Othering is embedded into the very fabric of fairy tales. The meaning lies in the subtext. Take for example the concept of the 'Step-mother' in the story of Cinderella. The word step indicates that she is not the mother. And therefore, someone who can be othered. This results in the characterization of the step mother as 'ugly' and 'disfigured.' The step mother has a rotten heart and it is seen to mirror the body. But what is perceived as rotten on the body is a 'disability.' This characterization of mind and body is a form of othering and presents to young children what is good and what is bad with respect to how it reflects on the body. The reflection in this case, being what society deems as acceptable in the body, effectively othering readers with disabilities. The book *And They Lived Ever After* tries to re-write this narrative of othering by re-defining what disability means by placing the authorial agency in the hands of the disabled.

The anthology uses the word 'disabled' instead of the word 'differently abled.' This is done with a sense of purpose as it is made to imply that 'someone is made disabled.' The authors and the characters in the book are made disabled by the society around them. These 'disabilities' are simply differences and impairments but are categorized as 'lack of ability' with respect to what society deems as 'ability.' This brings us back to the point of 'othering' as a result of societal prejudice and palatability. In the tale of *The Beauty and the beast*, the merchant is seen to have three daughters but the

heroine is 'Belle' because she is the most beautiful. The name Belle itself is French for the word beautiful. This puts into question, the fact of who deserves to be the heroine. The role of the heroine is reserved for the beautiful. All the heroines in fairy tales, including princesses must meet a standard of beauty set by society. This subsequently also sets a standard for normalcy. If you are not beautiful by fairy tale standards, you do not deserve a happy ending. You will never be a princess or a heroine. This concept is reinforced by the Idea of Snow White, who is known and loved for her fair skin and dark hair, implying that readers without fair skin are anomalies or not deserving of a fairy tale happy ending. There is a constant lack of representation.

This anthology critiques the construction of 'normalcy' and 'beauty' by presenting an alternate narrative which bring disabled people to the forefront and dismantles the dominant narrative of fairy tales which promotes ableism. The story in the anthology titled "Rapunzel and the People of Companara" by the author Soumita Basu is a prime example of this subversion. In the story, a girl named Rapunzel lives in a tall tower, situated in a beautiful province named Companara wherein she interacts with the birds and monkeys, gazes out of her big windows, reads books that transport her to different parts of the world, dances for Zumba classes and waits for Mama Lovington, her guardian to bring her fresh produce to indulge her sweet tooth.

Rapunzel is characterized as a joyous and fun-loving child. In the first half of the story, Mama L is characterized as a loving woman who takes care of Rapunzel instead of Rapunzel's absent parents. Rapunzel's parents are doctors who routinely visit other villages to cure the sick. Mama Lovington chooses to stay with Rapunzel and protect her from the outside world. Mama repeatedly tells Rapunzel that the world outside her tower

is harsh and judgmental and as a result of which, she must never leave. But one day, a prince comes crashing through Mama L's produce garden as a result of being chased by animals and happens to run by her tower. Upon calling for her help, Rapunzel lets down a black silk rope and pulls him up. Upon tumbling into her room, the prince is astonished by how a 'wheel chair using' Rapunzel was able to pull him up.

Rapunzel responds by saying:

Well, I wheel myself all around the tower and also the terrace, which has the best sunlight. Macnamara and my other monkey friends made a ramp from my room to the terrace. That's why my arms are very strong. I also pull Mama L up sometimes when she is really tired. I can't walk because of a defect in my legs. But I do have very strong arms. (26)

The more Rapunzel speaks about herself, the deeper the prince falls for her, ultimately resulting in him inviting her to his palace while also touring the rest of the province at the same time. Rapunzel tells the prince that there is no ramp from her room to the produce garden, to which the prince responds that he will carry her. Rapunzel is appalled by his suggestion and says "Carry me? I don't think I would like that. I always go everywhere wheeling my own chair" (26). Through the presentation of all these lines, it is evident that Rapunzel is not a pushover. This story dismantles the traditional stereotype of princesses being gullible by presenting a Rapunzel that is not easily swayed by the opinions of a man she has just met. She subverts what is normal in the traditional sense of the "naïve princess." She questions the prince about why he was at her garden and also pulls him up with the strength of her hands. This Rapunzel maintains her sense

of agency by emphasizing that she would not like to be carried, but would instead like to travel by wheeling her own chair.

When dawn arrives, Mama L bursts into Rapunzel's room and shrieks when she catches sight of the prince. While the prince greets her kindly, and invites her to the palace, she denies his invitation outright. And repeatedly says no to both her and Rapunzel's travel to the prince's palace. When Rapunzel pleads with Mama L to let her go, Mama reveals the reason as to why she is so adamant that neither her nor Rapunzel be exposed to the outside world.

Mama L says:

It's not your fault. Nobody comes to our house because they don't like me. That's why you don't have friends. You know my darling, how my skin bleeds sometimes and my face becomes full of blood drops? And the skin peels off from time to time because of my illness? I used to live just outside the potters' village. Every time people saw me, they would start screaming and run away. Children used to cry looking at the blood on my face. Their parents threw stones at me. Everywhere I went, people shouted "Witch, Witch!" ... that's why I keep telling you, it's a bad world out there! (27)

Mama L's words are a direct critique of the stereotypical representation of the witch in fairy tales and a striking critique of the construction of beauty and normalcy in fairy tales. Witches in fairy tales are deemed 'ugly.' These 'ugly' characteristics manifest themselves as moles, curly hair, hunched backs, and old age. All these characteristics are

normal bodily characteristics that manifest differently in different human beings. They are not identifying markers of a person's humanity or monstrosity unlike what is presented through classical fairy tales. Mama L is othered by the Companara province due to her appearance, which aligns with the identifying markers of the dominant witch stereotype. She has a face that bleeds occasionally and skin that peels as a result of her disease. But because of her disease, rocks are thrown at her and children scream at her because the parents do not educate their children on how to treat every single human being with dignity. The result of this 'othering' is Mama's loss of job opportunities in the province. Her delectable baked goods and her fresh produce find no place in society simply because of her appearance. The only ones who accept her are Rapunzel and her parents.

As the story continues, Rapunzel stretches from her wheelchair and hugs Mama L. Upon receiving reassurance, Mama L discloses the fact that Rapunzel too had rashes on her skin when she was younger. This worried both Mama L and Rapunzel's parents as they were afraid that she would be bullied by the rest of the children in the province resulting in them resorting to building a tower to house her where the sunlight could help her skin heal. Mama L says "Your parents were also worried about what people would say. People can say the harshest things without really understanding how they affect the other person" (27). This part of the story deconstructs what is normal, and instead showcases the true heart of a princess, one that is empathetic and courageous. This story redefines what is beautiful. Mama L who is deemed a witch because of her appearance, is shown to be Rapunzel's angel in disguise. She bakes Rapunzel bread, brings her produce, protects her from the outside world, provides her reassurance and helps her see herself as

a capable young woman with her own agency. This begs the question of what true beauty is. The stereotypical witch in lieu of appearances, Mama L, is the most beautiful because of her kind heart.

Towards the end of the story, Rapunzel realizes that the main road to the palace is extremely uneven which causes her wheelchair and by extension her, extreme discomfort. She asks the prince to construct better roads so that she can travel to the palace with ease. When the prince realizes that he is at fault for not catering to his citizens, he builds better roads and helps Rapunzel travel to the palace with ease. The prince also notices more wheelchair users emerge from within their homes after the roads were made to be disability friendly. This is when he realizes that it is society hindering access to disabled people.

Another story in the anthology *And They Lived Ever After* which dismantles the ableist stereotype of the 'princess' who is beautiful, fair, able bodied and young is the story titled *The Deaf Snow White* by Kanika Agarwal. In the story, Snow White is born with the ability to hear, but starts losing that ability when she turns ten years old. At the loss of his wife and his inability to take care of Snow White by himself, the King decides to remarry but ends up entangled with a new wife who views Snow White as abhorrent and treats her like her personal caretaker who tends to her personal needs. Her step sisters are of the same opinion. They pull at Snow White's frock and hair to grasp her attention all the while saying "Sweet Sister, that is the only way to get your attention with your deafness, no?" (98). Whenever Snow White tries to make new friends, her step mother would chide her by telling her that her deafness and thereby, her lack of ability to communicate would result in no one wanting to be friends with her. To this, Snow White

responds by saying "So, what if I can't hear? I speak and express myself to people. My friends can listen to me" (98). To this, the Queen responds with "Who would want to listen to a disabled person!" (98). As a result of her traumatizing and demeaning encounters with the Queen, Snow White loses her confidence and self-esteem, and becomes a shell of her former self.

This story reconstructs the idea of normalcy by presenting a Snow White that does not cater to the Ableist stereotype of the Princess. She is not a confident girl who is loved by everyone. Her own father starts treating her harshly as a result of her step mother's manipulative tactics. As time passes, Snow White becomes increasingly fearful of the Queen and eventually runs away into a forest as a result of the Queen's sudden outburst wherein she blames Snow White's deafness as a reason for her incompetency. Eventually, Snow White chances upon a cabin in the forest and decides to stay in the cabin due to her exhaustion from running for so long. After a while, the inhabitants of the cabin return and it is revealed that they are seven little people. The author purposefully refers to them as 'seven little people' instead of the 'seven dwarves' narrative that the classical *Snow White* tale tries to spin to imply their silly nature, in order to prove a point. In the original Snow-White fairy tale, the dwarves are seen as comical figures, their personas reduced to one dimensional personalities' wherein each of the dwarves recognize the other by the emotions they represent like 'happy', 'grumpy' and the like. The author tries to separate the tendency of fairy tales to equate dwarfism with silliness. Fairy tales tend to portray dwarves as mediums to move the plot forward and not as their own personas because stereotypically, dwarfs do not deserve the attention, respect, and characterization like that of the prince and the princess.

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The author does not portray the little people as comical figures, but instead showcases them as people who are in tune with empathy. Upon realizing that Snow White was deaf and had run away from a malicious step mother, they decide to house her. They do berate Snow White for her deafness by acting like it does not exist or by bullying her for its existence. Tabish the little person, hands her a piece of paper with writing that helps her understand what they wish to say to her. Instead of 'othering' her and perceiving her as different from the norm, they simply accept that everyone is different in their own way and simply cater to Snow White's needs much like how they wish for Snow White to cater to their needs.

As the story progresses, Snow White bonds with the little people and they all become family. But the loneliness in Snow White's heart never subsides because she can never truly be sure if people are speaking behind her back. One day, Snow white is approached by her step mother disguised as an old disabled woman. The disabled woman tells Snow White that she was kicked out of her house by her son for being disabled. She tells Snow White that the world is cruel to disabled people and encourages her to drink poison so she can finally be free of all the prejudice thrown towards her for being deaf. Snow White tries to reason with the woman but ultimately concludes that "The woman is right. People with disabilities suffer a lot. I have seen how cruelly people have treated my deafness. I should drink the poison with her before I have to suffer the dual distress of old age and disability" (103). Snow White drinks the potion and dies but is revived by the little person Tabish's antidote. This event results in the little people finding and approaching a deaf family near the forest who spoke with their hands instead of speaking

with their mouths. This results in the little people encouraging Snow White to join them to learn sign language to better communicate with her.

This re-telling of the *Snow-White* story critiques what is normal and what is beautiful. Snow White is not considered less appealing because of her inability to hear. People embrace her because she has a good heart. The evil step mother on the other hand is considered evil because of her wretched heart. The author normalizes Snow White's deafness by introducing a family that 'signs' to each other. They are not an anomaly, but instead, normal people who lead a different life. The life Snow White leads in the palace is different from the life the dwarves lead in the forest. And the lives lead by the deaf family is different from that of the dwarves. The story tries to normalize adapting to different lifestyles according to the needs of the person instead of parading a certain lifestyle as normal.

The story in the anthology titled *Cinderella's Sister* by Somrita Urni Ganguly also brings into question the notion of normalcy and beauty. This story also deconstructs the typical fairy tale tropes of the prince as a savior, the step sisters as evil and ugly and Cinderella as the ideal woman who caters to the ideas of the prince. In the original story of Cinderella, Cinderella's two step sister's and step mother bully her and other her because she is considered 'beautiful' and 'kind' according to society's standards. Cinderella is exempt from going to the ball but ultimately attends the ball and captures the eye of the prince with the help of her fairy God-mother. She later runs away when the clock strikes twelve and leaves behind a glass slipper which the prince in turn uses to find her. He then marries her and they live happily ever after. In the re-telling of the story titled *Cinderella's Sister*, the prince recharacterized as "ill-bred" (64) as he refuses to ask

Cinderella her name, refuses to divulge any information from his life and refuses to even look at her face. All he focuses on is Cinderella's 'swan like' neck and her breasts.

The author subverts the stereotypical characterization of the prince by presenting him as someone who wants a princess for his own sexual pleasures. Even after dancing with Cinderella for the whole night, he does not remember her face or her interests. He relies on a shoe to determine who Cinderella is. The author also dismantles the stereotype of the step sister being evil and ugly. In this re-telling, Cinderella's step sister is constantly ridiculed by her mother. Her mother constantly asks her to starve herself in order to look a certain way for the prince. She asks her daughter to keep her head 'lowered in reverence' so that the prince does not see her as someone who challenges his authority. Cinderella's step sister is constantly bogged down by society's standard of normalcy pertaining to a princess. A princess must starve herself so that she can have the ideal skinny body and must relinquish her agency, individuality and authority in order to remain as a passive sexual object for the prince. Towards the end of the story, Cinderella's step mother scrapes off parts of her daughter's foot in order to ensure that her foot fits the glass slipper so that the prince can marry her. This is a visual representation of how the step sister must fit into the mold of normalcy propagated by society.

The story in the anthology titled *The Ugly Duckling* by Priyangee Guha also brings to attention the blatant discrimination faced by the ugly duckling because she looks different from her siblings. The story critiques the definition of normalcy and beauty by naming the 'ugly duckling' Kaali as an ironic invocation to the blatant hypocrisy towards Kaali. It is the black hearted siblings of Kaali that portray true

ugliness, not Kaali's color. The story also critiques the construction of normalcy in fairy tales by presenting Kaali as a neurodivergent duck that is discriminated against because of society's lack of awareness and inclusivity.

Dominant narratives are often exclusionary and seek to 'other' or stigmatize anything it considers as abnormal. The anthology *And They Lived Ever After* problematizes these dominant narratives by subverting them through the presentation of an alternate narrative that de-stigmatizes the existence of the 'other' and instead provides a voice to the disabled to vocalize their concerns and struggles. The anthology presents the lives of persons with disabilities in a matter-of-fact way and does not dramatize or idealize their lives. It instead seeks to present reality as it is. All the stories in the anthology carry traces of disruption and deconstruction which seek to dismantle stereotypes in popular fairy tales and critique the construction of beauty and normalcy present in the narrative. The Social Model of disability studies synergizes with the anthology's purpose wherein society is seen as the prime suspect for characterizing impairment as a disability. Persons with disabilities are 'disabled' by society because society lacks the structure, organization and awareness that should facilitate the inclusion of disabled people.

Chapter 3

Subverting Ableism by Reimagining Fairy Tales

Through the multitude of re-tellings presented in the anthology *And They Lived Ever After* and the explanation of why the anthology exists in relation to the preface that reads "Through each re-telling, we find our way to new possibilities of belonging in this world; we visualize and see the colors and experiences and lives of people who are not often thought of (1)," it is evident that the anthology tries to adhere to the Social Model of disability studies which follows the principle of disabilities being the creation of an ableist society and not an inherent biological defect in need of a cure as seen in the Medical Model. "It seeks to redefine *disability* to refer to the restrictions caused by society when it does not give equitable social and structural support according to disabled peoples' structural needs (2)." According to the Social Model, impairment is made into a disability by the society when social structures and institutional systems do not cater to people with disabilities. While an impairment exists independently, a disability is a manufactured concept as it is a direct result of the society's inability to facilitate inclusion towards impaired people.

The 13 disabled authors of the anthology *And They Lived Ever After* put into perspective real life scenarios of the humiliation, neglect, discrimination, and isolation faced by people with disabilities by placing them within fairy tales that perpetrate ableist notions of normalcy and beauty. Fairy tales are a direct reflection of society's values. By critiquing these values and by presenting protagonists who face self-doubt, discrimination, and stigmatization but still come out on top with their empathy and

users out and about. This surprises the prince as he was previously unaware that there were wheelchair users in his kingdom. The reason for this sudden surge of wheelchair users was because the social structure of the kingdom was changed the result of which led society to become more inclusive towards both wheelchair users and non-wheelchair users. This resulted in the wheelchair users not needing to sacrifice their dignity in order to use public spaces made for the public. Rapunzel's refusal to 'adjust' resulted in the prince making society a more inclusive space for people with disabilities resulting in lesser stigmatization, discrimination and alienation. Rapunzel's refusal to accept the charity of being carried, provided more visibility to the disabled. This refusal is the reason for the prince's official speech on National Day about illnesses. In his speech, the prince also mentions about 'skin rashes and 'bleeding'. This brings tears to Mama L's eyes because all she has ever wanted is visibility and awareness for people with her disease. At the end of the events held on National Day, the Royal Orchestra is joined by three new musicians. All three of them are wheelchair users. This surprises the prince, leading him to say "I didn't know there were so many people on wheelchairs in this province" (33). To which she replies with a smile, "That's because there were no good roads" (33).

The story of Rapunzel emphasizes the need for disability awareness and the need for the construction of social structures that can help make the lives of disabled persons easier. The story also emphasizes the need to always 'ask before you help.' Because disabled people are not a charity. They do not need to be looked at with pity. What is of utmost importance is the need to construct society in a way that promotes inclusion and not assimilation or integration.

Another story from the anthology which highlights how impairment is made a disability by an ableist society is the story titled *Maryam and the Moon Angel* by the author Sanchita. In the story, the protagonist is Maryam. Maryam has one leg made of flesh and another leg made of wood. All her life, she has wanted two legs made fully of flesh, resulting in her gazing at others' legs as they go by. Although she was always discriminated against for her leg, one incident pushes her past the breaking point. In the story, this incident is when her teacher denies her permission to go for the class picnic. Maryam immediately feels wronged. When she asks why she cannot join her classmates, the teacher says "Because we cannot take responsibility for you. If you get hurt with your one leg, the whole school will be in trouble" (148). The reason Maryam cannot join the class picnic is because the school does not have the facilities to accommodate her. The bus does not have ramps and the itinerary of the class picnic is crafted in a way that is not inclusive to Maryam. As the story progresses, Maryam wonders "If only I did not help in getting ready for school, if only I could come to school by myself, Ammi would not have to get up so early to finish the household chores" (149). Maryam constantly blames herself for the ableist society's lack of respect for her and her impairment. Schools do not build structures that cater to children with impairments and teachers are not educated with disability awareness.

Another story which highlights how impairment is made a disability by ableist society is the story titled *Quack* by the author Niluka Gunawardena. This story is a retelling of the classical tale *The Ugly Duckling*. In the original, the ugly duckling is born to look different from the rest of the ducklings in the brood. Ultimately, the ugly duckling matures into a beautiful white swan. The story ends with a happy ending wherein,

ultimately, beauty is celebrated. If the duckling had remained 'ugly,' it would have still been ostracized by the other animals. In this re-telling, the story follows the life of the duckling 'Di' who is ostracized by her brood. When she runs away from her brood, she gets captured by a roaming Carnival. Her looks separated her from the standardized look of other ducklings, resulting in the owners of the carnival relegating her to the 'Marvellous Oddities' tent of the carnival.

She is termed a freak and is gaped at by visitors who come to see the carnival. Three days into her life at the carnival, Di learned to be obedient and still. This is indicative of a society that terms impairments as the 'other' and as 'freaky' resulting in further ostracization devoid of empathy. As the story progresses, Di describes the various animals inhabiting the 'Marvellous Oddities' tent. She makes mention of a 'little three-eyed piglet,' the 'Siamese Sisters,' the 'albino bear' and 'The Monstrosity.' The very characterizations of these animals speak of how they are othered. An extra eye makes the piglet different and in turn open to ostracization. Di recalls how the principle that was emphasized the most in her brood was 'conformity' and 'discipline.' If the ducks did not conform, they would be discriminated against and they would be ostracized. Di recalls how when she was born, she was starkly different from her siblings. As Di aged, the other ducklings started calling her 'Blacky.' As she started joining her mother and other siblings at Waverly Pond for swims, other ducks started addressing her as 'Ugly duckling'. Other ducklings started bullying her and ultimately started slandering her mother. This was her tipping point which resulted in her running away. She eventually ends up at a farm where a tabby cat yells at her for drinking his water. She is rescued by a big farm dog who brings her towards the chicken coops. The chickens are immediately

averse towards Di and blame her for the spread of disease. The chickens continue to die which results in Di being kicked out of the farm.

While Di walks away from the farm, her foot gets caught on a hunter's trap. This trap turns out to be a trap laid down by 'Mister' who runs the carnival. As the story progresses, Di becomes closer to the rest of the animals in the Marvellous Oddities tent. She sparks a friendship with the little piglet. The piglet asks her to refer to it as 'Baby' and she does so. Throughout the story, Di is seen as someone who always respects those around her. But she never receives the same respect back because society is conditioned to think that difference is the 'other.' The ableist society deems Di's difference as disability. The other animals in the Marvellous Oddities tent are also classified as disabled and therefore not deserving of respect or freedom. The animals are caged because society does not believe that they should live normal lives. They must be 'othered' and 'ogled at.' Towards the end of the story, the animals are all put into a train carriage for transportation, but they end up breaking free as a result of the carriage carrying the animals breaking off from the rest of the train and falling down the slope of the valley.

When Di realizes that she is free, she is ready to escape, but when she looks at the other animals, she realizes that they are still unmoving with the cage open. She tries to motivate them to escape, but they do not move. A Centaur says "The world outside is cruel, harsh and unforgiving. They will never accept us. It is better for us to stay here in the circus" (142). The six-limbed deer says "Why should we go back to a world where we don't belong!" (142) These animals are representative of disabled people being shackled

by society's norms and terrified of alienation. It is the ableist society that ostracizes persons with disabilities.

Another story from the anthology that supports the idea of impairment is made a disability as a result of ableist society is the story titled *The Ugly Duckling* by Priyangee Guha. Guha's re-telling of *The Ugly Duckling* story follows the life of the different duckling named 'Kaali.' Kaali is a neurodivergent duckling. Her brain does not process things and situations at the same speed as others. Kaali is also seen to be in the autism spectrum, resulting in her constantly repeating the same phrases to calm herself down. Kaali is constantly discriminated against by her siblings and to an extent even by her parents. On the first day of enrollment at the new Daisy Duck International School, her siblings completely ignore her and leave her to the bullies. They refused to associate with her. When Kaali entered class to be seated, no one wished to be seated next to her. Which resulted in her sitting where she stood. When the teacher asked the children to partner up with the person to their right, Kaali looked left, which resulted in her being laughed at. When she looked to her right, there was no one there, which resulted at her getting laughed at again. She was called 'weird,' 'pagal,' 'mad,' and 'retarded.' It is not Rekha's impairment that causes her to be ostracized, it is society's lack of awareness and lack of tolerance that causes her to become disabled.

The title of the anthology itself is *And They Lived Ever After: Disabled Women Retell Fairy Tales*. This is extremely significant because it is a play on the normative denouement of fairy tales which ends with 'And they lived happily ever after.' The concept of a 'happily ever after' is the biggest lie sold to readers of Children's fiction. The ending concretizes the fact that if the princess marries the prince, she will get a

happy ending. Happy endings are given to passive princesses who lie in wait for their prince charming. They forgo their agency and individuality in return for a happy ending. This reinforces patriarchal notions of marriage, motherhood, and self-actualization wherein girl children are conditioned to think that adhering to the norms presented by the princesses will help them thrive attain success and gain a happy ending. This narrative is also problematic for boy children as they will strive towards the patriarchal idea of a 'real man' who is dominant and has a savior complex. The intersection of race and colorism also cannot be ignored, as seen in the story *The Ugly Duckling* by Priyangee Guha wherein Kaali, which means 'blackie' is referred to as so because of her skin color and is 'othered' or discriminated against because of her skin tone. With respect to race, fairy tales propagate the idea of the 'ideal woman.' The ideal woman is one that has blonde hair, fair skin, cherry lips and caters to Eurocentric standards of beauty. This discriminates against women who have coily hair, pigmented lips and voluptuous bodies. As seen through these examples, fairy tales engage in the constant act of 'othering' where people who do not meet the standards of the fairy tale ideal are considered as ugly, evil or as a monstrosity. The stories in the collection *And They Lived Ever After* offers a realistic view of society. Unlike the fairy tales where disabled people face erasure and disabled princesses and princes are painted as nonexistent, this anthology presents fairy tales as mirrors of everyday life. Society is diverse with people from all walks of lives with different appearances. The anthology vouches for inclusion over integration, the latter of which vouches for assimilation which in itself is an exclusionary practice as it forces persons with disabilities to try to cater to society instead of society trying to cater to their needs. They too are human beings and deserve to live with dignity and honor. The stories

in the anthology ask readers to embrace the diversity present in society rather than marginalizing the disabled as evil. This aligns with the Social Model wherein a more inclusive society would foster growth, understanding and compassion. Disability is only a difference and every person is different.

Conclusion

It is commonly acknowledged that ages one to nine is the most crucial, formative years of a child's life, a period that has tremendous influence on their psyche, future value system, and worldview. This is the age they are introduced to fairy tales. Fairy tales, with their fantastical settings, idealistic plot structures and the distinctive characterizations of the prince, the princess, the witch, and the donor characters, often stimulate the imagination of children and act as a medium of entertainment and instruction that enables them to learn through the narratives. Learning through narratives and stories is referred to as 'narrative learning.' This type of education through narratives builds value systems, moral compasses, and advocates for normative ethical behavior by presenting abstract concepts like kindness, empathy, and courage through fairy tale narratives. Although the origins of fairy tales and children's literature were quite gory pre-dating their official emergence in the eighteenth century with violent depictions of rape and murder as characteristic of plot structure, they were still didactic in nature and tries to instill puritan virtues in children in the late sixteenth century. Present day fairy tales differ quite a bit with their eighteenth-century counterparts as they present more positive stories with happy endings and minimal consequences as compared to the fairy tales from the eighteenth-century which stressed on the negative consequences that socially unethical acts can produce. Present day iterations of fairy tales are largely pioneered by the Disney corporation. Disney's retellings sanitized the gory beginnings of fairy tales and instead presented idealistic solutions and happy endings, often adhering to the narrative of a 'happily ever after' for most characters, unless they are deemed evil or monstrous by the

narrative. The concept of what is good, what is evil and what constitutes monstrosity is shaped by Disney and their vision of what society should be, stereotypes and all.

Presently, Disney adaptations of fairy tales triumph over other iterations, occupying a larger space in popular imaginations and forming the dominant narrative of what fairy tales must be, often presenting a revolutionized version of the prince, princess and the witch wherein disruptive and different actualizations of the princess and the prince are erased and the witch is characterized as so because of her lack of both inner and outer beauty, the latter of which is tied into crooked noses, hunched backs, curly hair, moles, warts and old age as signifiers of their monstrosity and evil nature. This sets a dangerous precedent because the erasure of other materializations of the princess wherein a princess does not have cherry lips, fair skin, thin body, blonde hair, and European features, often seen as the 'normal' in fairy tale structures, is seen as the 'other' and is stigmatized. This portrayal of impairments as disabilities and delegating persons with these 'disabilities' the status of a witch, monster or as something less than human and undeserving of a life of dignity or a 'happily ever after' sets a perilous example for disabled children who read these fairy tales. Disabled children read these sanitized versions of fairy tales and become disillusioned when their reality is different from that of the one present in fairy tales. Disabled children who are exposed to the idea of 'beauty' and 'normalcy' in fairy tales at a young age, internalize their own disabilities as monstrosities and believe that a happy ending can never be achievable because of the way they look or behave. Often, characters with impairments are completely erased from the framework of fairy tales. This lack of representation for persons with disabilities in fairy tales results in less awareness about disabled children, leading to their stigmatization by

other children of their age who are never exposed to the concept of disability. With this, it can be concluded that fairy tales intertwine ableist narratives with stigmatizing stereotypes that often leave disabled children without an opportunity for imagination. These children cannot live vicariously through the fairy tale characters and often think of themselves as undeserving of a happy ending. Their impairments are made into disabilities by the society that excludes them from the dominant narratives. It is of utmost importance for writers to be more inclusive and tell the stories of disabled children so that they can feel a sense of oneness and representation with their fairy tale counterparts. The anthology *And They Lived Ever After: Disabled Women Retell Fairy Tales* is a step towards inclusion and the destigmatization of persons with disabilities. The anthology gives a voice to persons with disabilities and represents their struggles, humiliation and alienation when faced with an ableist society and their immense resilience in the face of oppressive societal stereotypes, policy and structure. This is what the Social Model tries to analyze. The Social Model views disability as propagated by society instead of it being a biological defect that needs to be cured. It vouches for inclusivity and compassion over integration and blatant assimilation into a society that is exclusionary in nature towards people with impairments. The anthology *And They Lived Ever After* consists of fairy tale retellings from the perspective of persons with disabilities. By providing a platform whereby disabled people can share their experience, it helps in spreading awareness to general society and large corporations alike. In this case specifically, it tackles mainstream hegemonic fairy tale narratives that paint a picture of a 'happily ever after' and reinforce ableist narratives. The title of the anthology itself is a play on the 'happily ever after' narrative propounded by modern fairy tales. 'And they live ever after' implies

that endings may not always end in happiness. Rejection and solitude are a part of life. But it is up to the individual to believe in themselves and their worth to keep moving forward.

Children should be told stories that are realistic enough to not set themselves up for failure in life. Slowly but surely, Disney is picking up the pace with more inclusive narratives like that of Moana but it is still not enough. Franchises hardly ever think about disabled children and their space in the world. Texts and narratives that are inclusive rather than exclusionary are extremely important in order to facilitate social regeneration where persons with disabilities are also given importance and can live with dignity.

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An Abstract of the Project Entitled:

Systemic Barriers and Narrative Resistance: A Study of *And They Lived Ever After: Disabled Women Retell Fairy Tales*

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Children's literature profoundly impacts children's self-perception and the way they understand and respond to the world. It is a powerful tool for fostering social justice and representation. This dissertation critically examines the entrenched mechanisms of "othering" in fairy tales, focusing on the anthology *And They Lived Ever After: Disabled Women Retell Fairy Tales*, a collection of narratives by 13 disabled women from India and Sri Lanka. By analyzing how these retellings subvert the ableist biases of traditional fairy tales, this study interrogates the ways in which such stories construct and perpetuate exclusionary ideals of beauty, often rendering disabled individuals invisible or portraying them as monstrous, undesirable, or villainous. Anchored in the Social Model of Disability Studies—which shifts the discourse from individual impairment to systemic barriers—this research employs a qualitative methodology, integrating textual and discourse analysis to deconstruct the ideological underpinnings of these narratives. The study not only critiques the reinforcement of ableist ideologies in mainstream children's literature but also highlights the transformative potential of disability-inclusive storytelling. By advocating for inclusivity rather than mere integration, this dissertation underscores the necessity of reimagining children's literature to provide authentic, empowering representations of disability, thereby fostering a more equitable and inclusive narrative landscape that affirms diverse identities and lived experiences.