

The Cinderella Complex: Investigating the Subversive Fairytale in Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion And Charles Perrault's Cinderella

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Abstract

Fairytales act as a cultural repository for societies. This repository does not just contain motifs of just one society, but binds various cultures together. The Cinderella character type is no exception. Cinderella does not remain a simple fairytale character, but becomes a symbol for how patriarchal societies treat a victim of abuse. I argue that such a character type, a woman's rags to riches story, not only fascinates Western countries like France and England, but also Eastern countries like Pakistan. I compare Eliza from Bernard Shaw's English play Pygmalion with Cinderella from Charles Perrault's French fairytale, all the while arguing how this fairytale relates to Pakistani women. This is done by using Stith Thompson's Motif Index of Folk Literature. By drawing on fairytale stock characters like Cinderella, Shaw creates certain expectations for the audience before flipping them. Perrault's Cinderella may have escaped her abusive family by following patriarchal standards, but Shaw's Eliza rebels against them. This comparative analysis aims to see how certain fairytale motifs transcend borders, subversively criticizing each society they visit. Such a study becomes pertinent to patriarchal societies like Pakistan's where women may relate their own struggles to a character like Cinderella. In this fashion, the fairytale can even empower marginalized communities like abuse victims.

Keywords: fairytale, character type, motifs, abuse, class structure

Introduction

The Cinderella character type occupies our collective consciousness. It does not remain a fairytale for children, but becomes a story deeply embedded in our social psychology. More often than not, literary fairytales subversively critique the

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societies they are produced in. In Cinderella's case, her fairytale questions why we are attracted to a woman's transformation from rags to riches after meeting a man, especially to the point that Cinderella has now become a part of popular culture.

However, what does that have anything to do with Pakistan, a country far removed from Cinderella's birthplace in France? After turning into a motif and character type, certain symbols cross borders. In the digital age, symbols do not remain in isolation, but travel across the globe. We find the allure of suddenly becoming wealthy after a marriage does not encompass one society, but several others, as well. Examining how the fairytale creates and subverts class and gender ideals, this paper compares Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* with Charles Perrault's seventeenth century fairytale "Cinderella: or, the Glass Slipper" by using Stith Thompson's *Motif Index of Folk Literature*.

While entertaining for children, Jack Zipes notes that Charles Perrault's literary fairytales have an "overwhelming tendency" to give "models of behavior for the rearing and schooling of upper-class children" (2006). One's social standing is not just determined by material wealth, but also by their breeding and behaviour. Where Perrault's fairytales showed upper class children their expected social and gender roles, Bernard Shaw challenged these ideals for young audiences. The audience already knows how Cinderella's tale ends. One may argue that Shaw draws on Perrault's fairytale motifs and stock characters to create certain expectations for the audience before challenging and flipping these ideals.

To put it simply, this research explores how Perrault's Cinderella escapes abuse by passively accepting patriarchal norms, while Shaw's Eliza rebels against them. Eliza becomes a dynamic force of change, whereas Cinderella remains submissive throughout the narrative.

❖ **Cinderella in Pakistan**

A question arises: why relate a French fairytale and an English play to women's situation in Pakistan? The simple answer is that cultural motifs like Cinderella transcend borders in our globalized world. This is the main interest and purpose behind conducting such a research. Fairytales attract us because they provide us with escapism from our reality. However, even this escapism reveals certain truths about the social psychology of a people. In this way, if Cinderella can travel from France to England, then she can certainly find her place in the Pakistani context.

These motifs and character types address our collective consciousness, rather than mirroring just one society.

Again, like Perrault, Shaw speaks for his own Edwardian English society. He does not have any other place in mind. However, Sneha Saha and Tanishka S. Safri conducted a social experiment with over 150 South Asian women, linking these women's financial dependence with the men in their lives. Intriguingly, all of them identified with the "Cinderella complex," the social phenomenon of women's financial dependence on a man, mostly husbands and fathers (Saha and Safri, 2016). Moreover, all of these women defined the Cinderella story as "Cinderella being rescued by Prince Charming" (Saha and Safri, 2016), regardless of their social or economic background. Their main focus is on seeing Cinderella as a woman suddenly saved by a handsome prince after suffering from abuse in her father's home.

Saha and Safri's explanation of the Cinderella story is also how I define it in this paper. Where Perrault's Cinderella uses the patriarchy's own rules to escape her abusive family, Shaw's Eliza subverts this expectation and carves her own path.

Additionally, this definition of Cinderella's fairytale echoes in Shaw justifying why he subtitled *Pygmalion* as *A Romance*. Shaw says, "I call it a romance because it is the story of a poor girl who meets a gentleman at a church door, and is transformed by him, like Cinderella, into a beautiful lady" (as cited in Henderson, 1952). The Cinderella character type does not remain an idea borrowed from Perrault's story but becomes a certain cultural motif that even modern audiences can recognize.

Nevertheless, how does everyone within such an audience recognize this character type and motif? Trevor J. Blank argues that all individuals recall "meaningful symbols" in "[popular] culture" through a "cultural inventory" (2018, pp. 4-5). In the digital age independent of geographic restraints, this "cultural inventory" (Blank, 2018, p. 4) becomes even more expansive with popular culture symbols like Cinderella. Everyone has seen the character type in animated films and children's storybooks, with fairytales being incorporated in school curricula.

Pakistan is no exception to this phenomenon. We see television shows like Geo TV's *Aik Nayee Cinderella* (2012) and Hum TV's *Fairy Tale* (2023) being produced that revolve around a middle-class woman dreaming of better financial conditions

through marriage. Both deal with protagonists who think of marriage into a wealthier family as get-rich-quick schemes. As a character, Cinderella becomes appealing for patriarchal societies where cultural and traditional values impact women's participation in the labour force.

Within such patriarchal societies, men are painted as the breadwinners and women as homemakers (Syed & Ali, 2018). Such a cultural framework creates further barriers for women in the workforce. It places most of the domestic work on women rather than men, even for employed women. In these cases, women have to navigate between both the demands of their employment along with the majority of the housework (Zulfiqar et al., 2024). The feminist critic, Virginia Woolf, posits a similar scenario in her essay, "Shakespeare's Sister". Even if a writer as talented as William Shakespeare was born as a woman during the Renaissance period, she would have been ridiculed and "told to mend the socks or mind the stew" instead of reading and writing plays (Woolf, 2001). By giving an example of the Renaissance era, Woolf links it to the growing discontent within working women of the modernist period. Women are participating in the labour force more than ever, but still have cultural and social roles of domesticity to abide by. Through the above quoted examples, we can see how the situation is not much different from contemporary Pakistan. If women are working, then it is not without additional barriers.

Because of these circumstances, the Cinderella character type becomes an important cultural motif for even Pakistani audiences. Even if they cannot relate to such a character, they can at least recognize and apply it to their own social and cultural norms.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research that compares and analyzes the protagonists of the two primary texts: "Cinderella; or, the Glass Slipper" by Charles Perrault and *Pygmalion* by Bernard Shaw. Stith Thompson's Motif Index of Folk Literature is used for developing such a comparative analysis between Shaw's Eliza from *Pygmalion* and Perrault's Cinderella from his fairytale. Motifs are elements that are found most commonly in fairytales and this research studies how Perrault and Shaw use these motifs. To study how Perrault and Shaw navigate through gender and social norms, motifs that address such issues have been chosen for this research.

❖ **Fairytale Motifs in “Cinderella” and Pygmalion:**

In order to see how cultural and gender norms are navigated through motifs, three motifs have been chosen from Thompson’s Motif Index. The first is the clock as a signifier of class; the second is the motif of abused children being transformed in fairytales. The last motif is of how “modesty brings reward” in these fairytales (Thompson, 2016). The clock and time motif are particularly significant because it appears a total of eight times in Stith Thompson’s Motif Index of Folk Literature. From Thompson’s Motif Index, striking clocks, in particular, at the end of a “long day” (Thompson, 2016) interest us.

For Shaw’s *Eliza* and Perrault’s *Cinderella*, the clock signifies the moment of truth and even the protagonists’ origins. The clock distinguishes the divide between rich and poor and becomes a symbol of economic status within both stories. At the beginning of *Pygmalion*, the stage directions mention a “church clock” that “strikes the first quarter” (Shaw, 2022). While this seems insignificant, this clock sound is also what sets the play into motion and reveals the main characters: Eliza and Higgins. We also first see Eliza’s origins as a flower girl when the “church clock strikes the second quarter” (Shaw, 2022). Unlike *Cinderella*, the clock does not magically transform Eliza from rich to poor. Rather, Eliza is established and maintained as an ordinary, poor girl, who has been picked up by a gentleman, Higgins, as a social experiment.

Despite the social experiment, Eliza’s agency can’t be discredited. She requests Higgins, a phonetics professor, to give her language classes. By improving her accent, she wishes to be a “lady in a flower shop” (Shaw, 2022) instead of selling flowers on the street. Despite the patriarchal standards of Edwardian England, Eliza is quite independent in her financial choices. Further, the clock appearing at the very beginning of the play signifies Eliza’s independence from the social and cultural norms of Edwardian England. Instead of being controlled by society’s standards, the clock forces her to take action into her own hands.

As for *Cinderella*, her clock appears in the middle of her narrative. After she has transformed into a wealthy woman, her “poison rags” turn into a “cloth of gold and silver, beset in jewels” (Perrault, 2012). She has become a princess but one with a timer set on her. *Cinderella* has to come back home before midnight. Otherwise, the clock striking “twelve” reverts her carriage to a “pumpkin” and her horses into “mice” (Perrault, 2012). Extraordinary elements denoting an upper class like a carriage,

horses and a ball gown turn into ordinary items. Moreover, in “Cinderella,” the clock chronologically appearing in the middle of the narrative highlights the division of class. She starts as a rich woman in her parents’ household before her stepfamily forces her into servitude. Cinderella’s initial transition as a poor maid acts as her pseudo-reality. It is only temporary, and a transitory state. Ironically, this magical change from a maid to a woman in a ball gown is actually her reality. When the clock strikes twelve at the prince’s ball, Cinderella reverts back to her pseudo reality of poverty.

Additionally, Perrault’s narrative seems far more interested in maintaining Cinderella as an upper-class woman wronged by her step mother and step sisters. Perrault keeps reiterating how Cinderella is a “hundred times handsomer” (2012) than her step sisters, even in her maid attire. Cinderella’s beauty does not just come from her physical appearance but from her upper class breeding and behaviour, both things that her step sisters lack. Behaviour becomes social currency. Part of this social behaviour that Perrault tries propagating is Cinderella responding to her step family’s abuse with kindness. Even in the Pakistani context, women’s responses to abuse largely depend on “circumstances” and “their assessment of available options” (Zakar et al., 2012). Often, these women will cope with abuse by “modifying emotions,” rather than “trying to alter” the actual source of abuse (Zakar et al., 2012). They are much like Cinderella who responds to her step family’s abuse with kindness, because that is her only available option. Perrault’s Cinderella becomes a better reflection of not only his own patriarchal society, but the Pakistani one as well. From these responses, we can see why the tale of Cinderella is a story that even Pakistani audiences can relate to.

If the audience can find a mirror in Cinderella’s tale, then Eliza’s story shows them how an independent problem solver can navigate through abuse. Shaw’s Eliza does not have Cinderella’s breeding but tries mirroring it to better her financial situation. In essence, she is a “common girl” in a “nearly clean apron” and a “shoddy coat” (Shaw, 2022). She changes from these regular clothes to an exoticized Japanese kimono, quite similar to how Cinderella changes into a magical ball gown. By wearing this kimono, Eliza invokes reactions like “bly me!” and “by Jove” by those closest to her (Shaw, 2022). In both cases, Cinderella and Eliza aren’t recognized by those closest to them, simply due to an attire which shows wealth instead of poverty. Eliza’s new benefactor Higgins cannot believe she can look so beautiful after cleaning up, while Cinderella’s step family cannot fathom how the beautiful woman

dancing with the Prince can be the girl they mistreat at home. This is also akin to the motif of the “maltreated children transformed” (Thompson, 2016). For this motif, abused children are transformed into an identity where they are completely unrecognizable for their abusers.

Nonetheless, Eliza’s transformation becomes far more vivid on stage, since there is a physical depiction, unlike Perrault’s Cinderella. So why is there a difference in the medium? Can’t a written story have the same impact? Jennifer Schacker states that folklore emerges as a “performance of sorts” that is shaped by the “emergent notions of genre and its audiences” (2015). As opposed to audience expectations, where Perrault uses Cinderella’s transformation as literal transcendence, it takes a more comic tone in Shaw’s narrative. We expect Eliza to be admired, not ridiculed. Eliza even wonders if she looks “silly” (Shaw, 2022), rather than being grateful for the new clothes like Cinderella. Moreover, the housekeeper, Mrs. Pearce, immediately warns Higgins to not say anything to “make the girl conceited about herself” (Shaw, 2022). Eliza has changed from a commoner to a beauty. Despite this, everyone looks at her with suspicion, rather than admiring her like Cinderella.

We must compare how Cinderella’s transformation involves a magical ball gown and Eliza’s has a Japanese kimono. While Cinderella’s magic does not exist for Eliza, the oriental hint in Eliza’s clothing gives her Cinderella’s otherworldliness. Where Cinderella was elevated by magic, Eliza is exalted by the European fascination with oriental fashion. Speaking of fashion and the ball gown: when Cinderella arrives at the ball, the Prince is quickly enamored by her in her new, wealthy attire. The Prince never ceases his “compliments” and “amorous speeches” about Cinderella’s beauty during the ball (Perrault, 2012). Beauty is again linked with symbols of an upper class.

In *Pygmalion*, Mrs. Higgins’ party can be seen as a parody of Cinderella’s ball scene. Eliza is introduced into society as Higgins’ social experiment, rather than a person. Like Cinderella, Eliza is excessively praised for her looks, clothing and mannerisms by Mrs. Higgins’ guests. Even Higgins is enamored by the success of his social experiment that churned out the first woman he actually admires. Ironically, the first woman he admires is his own creation, a flower girl turned society woman.

His mother, Mrs. Higgins, then shatters his reverie by saying, “If you suppose she doesn’t give herself away in every sentence she utters, you’re absolutely cracked

about her” (Shaw, 2022). Regardless of Eliza learning about everything it takes to be an upper-class woman, she still feels uncomfortable in this new persona. Her discomfort gives her reality and origins away. Mrs. Higgins’s comment subverts the audience’s supposition that the debut will be highly praised by everyone like Cinderella’s. Instead, we focus on Eliza’s discomfort because of her straying away from her origins and pretending to be somebody else.

In Pygmalion’s ball scene, Eliza’s upper-class attire acts as her pseudo-reality. It is not the reality she identifies with, which is why Mrs. Higgins immediately recognizes the discrepancy. While comparing Pygmalion and “Cinderella,” Charles Berst notes that similar situations in both produce “variant emotions” from their audiences (1995). The audience admires Cinderella, while it feels trepidation for Eliza.

When Perrault emphasized the nobility of his protagonist, he also propagated how virtues like forgiveness elevate this beauty. By the end of the story, Cinderella, the woman “no less good than beautiful,” later “embraces and forgives” her step sisters, despite their abuse and maltreatment (Perrault, 2012). Cinderella does not hold them accountable. Because of her modesty and good behaviour, Cinderella is rewarded with good fortune in the form of marriage and a better financial state. Stith Thompson calls this the “modesty brings reward” motif (2016) in his Motif Index.

Not only is Cinderella beautiful and wealthy now, she has what her step family lacks: good behaviour. The narrative becomes a moral lesson for children that is easily digestible by their adult figures. As long as the abuse is met by kindness, it can reverse one’s misfortunes. Instead of escaping her abusers, she remains under the watchful eye of her step family before marrying the Prince. In short, she retains the patriarchal family structure, rather than disabling it. Her glass slipper and marriage to the Prince acts as a reward for her forgiving nature. However, Cinderella’s actions mustn’t be dismissed as simply complacency, since that was her only available option. However, we must keep in mind that Cinderella responds to cruelty in the way that the patriarchal society expects her to: kindness and forgiveness rather than vengeance. Patriarchal societies, whether they are English, French or Pakistani, all have the same standards for women.

Compared to Shaw's narrative, reactions to abuse and even potential abuse vary. Eliza's father, Alfred Doolittle, admits to raising her with the "lick of a strap now and then" (Shaw, 2022). What is Eliza's response to such a physically abusive upbringing? She flees from her household and seeks to improve her financial situation. For that, Eliza realizes she requires a certain accent— a specific social behaviour— to open a shop and interact with a richer clientele. Moreover, unlike Cinderella, she does not respond to her family's abuse with kindness. When Higgins asks Eliza if she wants to meet her abuser and father, Eliza calls Doolittle a "disgrace" she never wants to meet again (Shaw, 2022). After seeing how similar Cinderella's situation is with Pakistani women, Shaw's reenactment of Cinderella becomes revolutionary.

Furthermore, after Eliza's debut into society, she sits patiently as Higgins frets over his slippers. Slippers here take an entirely different connotation from "Cinderella". Eliza expects to be appreciated or at least acknowledged for going through Higgins' social experiment. She remains silent till Higgins says, "What the devil have I done with my slippers?" (Shaw, 2022). At this, Eliza snatches his slippers and hurls them at Higgins. When Eliza does not receive her due appreciation, she shouts, "Take your slippers; and may you never have a day's luck with them!" (Shaw, 2022). Like Cinderella, the audience expects Eliza to be grateful to Higgins for her successful transformation, despite Higgins never giving her emotional validation. She should admire him for changing her reality, just like Cinderella would have worshipped the Prince after taking her away from her abusive household.

Instead, Eliza questions Higgins about the purpose behind this transformation. She rebels against it. Intriguingly, the clock striking "twelve" on the "mantelpiece" reappears in Higgins' drawing room (Shaw, 2022). This moment coincides with Eliza's transition into her new reality. She is now neither a poor girl who can make a living by selling flowers, nor a rich woman whose father can pay for a hefty dowry. Eliza finds herself in a more transitory state, unlike Cinderella. For Cinderella, the Prince instigates her escape from abuse and perhaps eventual servitude towards her in-laws. After all, the Prince did save her, albeit unknowingly. When Eliza is presented with such a scenario, she flings that symbol of servitude, or slippers, at the man who represents it.

For Eliza, we may argue that Higgins is far from a patriarchal abuser. He is more of an eccentric, albeit insensitive, middle aged man unaware of a young woman's

desires. Still, we must consider Pygmalion's final argument scene when Higgins insults Eliza, calling her "a damned impudent slut" (Shaw, 2022). Unlike Galatea in the Greek myth of Pygmalion, Eliza is not grateful for Higgins carving out this new, in-between version of herself. The Greek Pygmalion finds fault in all women except for his sculpture-turned-woman, Galatea. Higgins' fantasy of turning a flower girl into a society woman is shattered when Eliza claims her personhood by throwing his shoes at him. Eliza does so because she fears that Higgins might even "strike" her in the future if she continues being under his tutelage and subservience (Shaw, 2022). He has not yet stricken her in the current narrative. Higgins's actions, nevertheless, point towards potential abuse in the future. In this way, Eliza accepts a divorce from Higgins, rather than being potentially abused by him. She even goes on to marry Freddy, a boy her age, who is "not her master, nor ever likely to dominate her" (Shaw, 2022).

Unlike Cinderella, who prefers "modifying emotions," Eliza seeks a "problem solving strategy" such as separation (Zakar et al., 2012). In Rubeena Zakar et al.'s study of Pakistani women facing abuse, many women still chose independence and divorce over facing abuse with grace and kindness. Eliza's "problem focused strategy" (Zakar et al., 2012) echoes not only Edwardian women turning away from abuse, but Pakistani women as well. Further, by centering her own personhood, Eliza rejects being taken as "an object, the Other" (Beauvoir, 2011). She does not let patriarchal social standards alienate her as a woman. Rather, she takes a very human step to free herself from abuse.

This is also the reason why the Cinderella character type remains so prominent in the Pakistani consciousness. A fairytale feeds into one's fantasy. Cinderella is no exception. Cinderella's original tale shows the fantasy that enduring abuse will eventually reward one with wealth and love. Not only does Cinderella feed into this fantasy, she also rings the truth. Many Pakistani women's freedom is linked with financial security often tied with male family members. Cinderella becomes an archetype that many women can fantasize over. She is an ordinary girl who gains everything despite escaping an abusive household. While Perrault's Cinderella escapes by following social standards of forgiveness, Shaw's Eliza does so by rebelling against them. Eliza flings the symbol of servitude like Higgins's slippers. She does not give into the "foolish romantic tradition," as Shaw says, but chooses a life of respectability over wealth (2022). Where Cinderella fed into the fantasy of marrying into a wealthy family, Eliza provides hope for a better future by her own,

independent means. She does not wait to be rescued by a prince, but takes her agency into her own hands.

Conclusion

Both Shaw and Perrault address young audiences to propagate their respective messages. Perrault primarily deals with children to hone in a certain behaviour likable to society. For Perrault, one can only succeed in life if they respond to life's cruelties with kindness and grace. Shaw, contrastingly, uses the stage set up by Perrault and flips it entirely. Instead of being grateful for her transformation, Eliza rejects social patriarchal standards and carves her own, independent path by the end of the play. Where Perrault's fairytale favored traditional society's values, Shaw has now flipped reality itself to propagate a new message. However, it is crucial to consider that both Cinderella and Eliza respond to abuse differently. Cinderella does so by following patriarchal standards, while Eliza rebels against those same norms. Eliza takes what is presented to her and flings it like Higgins's slippers. The narrative changes, but the motifs remain the same.

By connecting motifs, we get an interesting study of how class structures and fairytales expose our psychology and how we can relate to them even in countries like Pakistan. Whether it is English, French or Pakistani society, Cinderella unveils two different ways women can combat abuse: giving into social standards or rebelling against them. In this way, fairytales do not remain bedtime stories for children. They become a vessel to empower marginalized communities. Both Cinderella and Eliza were abused by their families. Their fairytale shows how it is possible to escape such a situation and carve out a new life for themselves. When these fairytales are modernized and even adapted into the school curricula, we are able to connect a story of the past with real life, contemporary issues. That, in turn, becomes the subversive power of the fairytale.

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