

ACROSS CULTURE: A COMPARATIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF GERMAN FAIRY TALES AND SINHALA FOLK STORIES

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Abstract

Fairy tales and folk stories are essential to cultural heritage, transmitting values, norms, and social structures across generations. This study conducts a comparative thematic analysis of German fairy tales and Sinhala folk stories, focusing on their portrayals of gender, power, and justice. The research examines selected German fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm collection, such as Cinderella and Snow White, alongside Sinhala folk stories, particularly those featuring the trickster figure Andare. A qualitative literary analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and ideological structures within these narratives. The findings reveal that German fairy tales reinforce traditional gender roles, often portraying women as passive and dependent on male intervention, while men are characterised by strength and authority. Power in these tales is typically hierarchical and inherited, with justice framed as an inflexible system of moral consequences. In contrast, Sinhala folk stories, especially those centred around Andare, subvert authority through humour and satire, depicting power as flexible and justice as rehabilitative rather than punishing. This contrast highlights how different cultures conceptualise morality and social order. Additionally, the study emphasises the role of oral tradition in shaping the evolution of these narratives, demonstrating how cultural context influences storytelling conventions. By bridging two distinct folklore traditions, this research underscores both the universal and culturally specific aspects of fairy tales and folk stories. The study concludes that while both traditions use folklore to reinforce or challenge social norms, Sinhala folk stories offer a more fluid and fair vision of power and justice. These insights contribute to broader discussions on cross-cultural storytelling and its role in shaping perceptions of gender and authority. Future research could explore how these narratives evolve in contemporary retellings, influencing modern social and literary discourses.

Keywords: Comparative Folklore, Gender Roles, German Fairy Tales, Justice, Sinhala Folk Stories

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Introduction

Fairy tales and folk stories have long been a fundamental part of cultural heritage, offering valuable insights into the values, norms, and beliefs of the societies that produce them. These narratives, passed down through generations, serve as a reflection of the collective consciousness, shaping societal perspectives on key issues such as gender, power, and justice. In examining such tales, it becomes apparent that these themes are not only central to the plots but also provide a window into how different cultures construct and understand moral order and social roles. This research seeks to conduct a thematic comparison of German fairy tales and Sinhala folk stories, focusing on how these narratives shape societal perspectives on gender, power, and justice.

The German fairy tales, particularly those collected by the Brothers Grimm, have become iconic symbols of Western folklore. Stories like Cinderella, The Fisherman and His Wife, and Snow White have endured for centuries, offering rich portrayals of gender dynamics, social hierarchies, and justice. These tales often reinforce traditional notions of gender roles, where women are typically portrayed as passive, moral figures awaiting rescue, while men hold power and authority. At the same time, these stories show the effects of greed, lies, and jealousy, often focusing on the importance of justice and the eventual victory of good qualities.

On the other hand, Sinhala folk stories, with their roots in Sri Lanka's rich oral tradition, present a distinct yet equally captivating perspective on these themes. The stories of Andare, a trickster figure, offer sharp critiques of authority and social norms, challenging the established hierarchies and exposing the weaknesses in systems of power. Tales such as Andare and the King and The Story of Kumari explore the dynamics of gender and power through humour, wit, and personal sacrifice, revealing how wisdom, intelligence, and moral integrity can go beyond traditional authority. While the role of women in Sinhala folk stories often aligns with traditional values of sacrifice and selflessness, the portrayal of figures like Andare offers a more challenging and equitable perspective on power.

This comparative study aims to explore the thematic interaction between gender, power, and justice in both traditions, highlighting the similarities and differences in how these cultural narratives reflect and shape societal attitudes. By analysing key stories from both traditions, this research will seek to answer the following central question: How do the themes in German fairy tales and Sinhala folk stories shape societal perspectives on gender, power, and justice?

The exploration of this question will contribute to a deeper understanding of how folklore serves not only as a medium of entertainment but also as a cultural object that shapes and supports the values of a society. Through a careful examination of the selected stories, this research will shed light on the moral lessons imparted by these tales, the portrayal of gender roles, and how power dynamics are represented and challenged. Furthermore, it will offer insights into how these themes continue to echo in contemporary societies, influencing modern perceptions of justice, authority, and gender relations.

By bridging the German and Sinhala folk traditions, this study will also demonstrate the universal and culturally specific elements in the representation of fundamental social values. Ultimately, this research will illuminate how fairy tales and folk stories function as both mirrors and creators of the societies from which they originate, shaping the worldview of their audiences across time and space.

Literature Review

This literature review examines existing scholarship on power, gender and justice in Sinhala folk tales and German fairy tales. Through the examination of these fairy tales, we can observe how they reflect and shape social perceptions within their respective cultural contexts. While German fairy tales, especially the Brothers Grimm collection, tend to validate the usual social conventions, Sinhala folk

tales, especially those of Andare, are a subversive and humorous critique of power and conventions. This essay explores in detail these elements, with significant contributions having been made by researchers in the past, and with observations on where earlier research had shortcomings.

German Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are a subgenre of folk narratives characterised by magical events, fantastical characters, and archetypal plot structures that convey moral or cultural lessons. They often feature mythical beings (such as fairies, witches, or talking animals), supernatural interventions, and a protagonist's journey toward justice, transformation, or resolution.

According to Zipes (2002), fairy tales are "stories of wonder" that have evolved from oral traditions and were later standardised through literary adaptations. They "address universal human experiences and social structures, offering symbolic resolutions to real-life conflicts" (p. 3). Tatar (2003) emphasises their didactic purpose, noting that fairy tales often reflect "the fears, desires, and social norms of the cultures that produced them."

While fairy tales share roots with myths and legends, they are distinguished by their focus on fantasy and moral resolution rather than historical or religious truth (Lüthi, 1986).

1. Gender Roles and Transformations

Research on German fairy tales tends to indicate the presentation of strict gender roles where women and men are assigned particular social roles. Jorgensen (2014) observes that gender has a close association with changes in Grimm's fairy tales. Female transformations are identified with beauty and passivity and reinforce traditional femininity, while male transformations focus on power, strength and wisdom. In *The Frog Prince*, for example, the princess must accept the transformed prince, indicating social norms of female obedience and male authority.

Feminist scholars have also argued that fairy tales make young readers internalise patriarchal values. Bottigheimer (1986) argues that fairy tales such as 'Snow White' and 'Sleeping Beauty' maintain the ideal of passive waiting heroines for male rescue, encoding the idea that women's most outstanding virtues are obedience and virtuous beauty. Tatar (1992) continues this thread of thought further, proclaiming that these fairy tales socialise young girls into internalising ideals of patience, virtue and endurance as a path to ultimate reward.

2. Power Dynamics and Authority

German fairy tales prefer to enact struggles of authority, especially between familial relationships. Scherf (2003) reflects on how fairy tales like 'Hansel and Gretel' and 'The Juniper Tree' resolve inherent family conflicts, namely the stepmother stereotype as archetypal evil. Tales prefer to reinforce the argument that mother figures who deviate from their nurturing role are to be punished, confirming established family hierarchies.

Furthermore, scholars such as Zipes (2012) explain that fairy tales have historically been in place to maintain the status quo by rationalising hierarchical power systems. In 'Cinderella', for example, the suffering endured by the heroine is rewarded with promotion of her status in society, validating that good and tolerance will be rewarded in the end and not opposition or outright defiance.

3. Justice and Moral Lessons

Fairy tales are mostly moral tales with lessons on revenge and justice. Markman (1977) argues that magic and fantasy in the Grimm fairy tales are means of achieving social and economic justice. In 'The Goose Maid', for example, the deceitful maid is punished while the real princess is restored to her throne, with a clear moral order where justice prevails.

Other scholars, however, criticise this articulation of justice on the basis that it is more corrective than rehabilitative. Tatar (2003) notes that villains, and particularly female ones such as witches and stepmothers, are usually punished harshly, imposing strict moral dichotomies more than permitting recovery or transformation.

Sinhala Folk Stories (Andare Tales)

Sinhala folktales, especially the Andare tales, offer a gendered vision of power and justice that is unique. In contrast to the formal moral systems of German fairy tales, Andare tales use satire and humour to undermine authority and social convention.

1. Gender agency and dynamics

Unlike the passive German fairy tale heroines, Sinhala women in folk tales are characterised by cleverness and wit. Few scholarly papers, however, address the portrayal of female characters in Andare tales. Goonetilleke (1999) reports that even though Sinhala women in folklore are primarily represented in home contexts, in some stories, they also have strong agency and act based on wit and ingenuity.

Furthermore, Andare's interactions with women describe both traditional and transgressive features of gender relationships. In some stories, Andare's puns satirise gender roles and transgress male presumptions of superiority. However, these representations are unpredictable and further research is needed to explore the hidden implications of gender in Sinhala folk tales.

2. Power Structures and Social Critique

Andare's stories are unique in their disrespectful treatment of authority. As a court jester in royal courts, Andare uses humour to expose the weaknesses of the ruling class. Gunasekara (2005) argues that Andare is a trickster character who subverts power structures from within. In contrast with hierarchical justice in German fairy tales, Andare's utilisation of humour allows him to ridicule kings and nobles without suffering harsh punishments.

This aspect of Sinhala folklore is in line with the larger South Asian tradition of storytelling, where humour is used as a means of social commentary. While German fairy tales tend to reinforce existing power hierarchies, Andare's stories reflect a more flexible, negotiable concept of authority in which intelligence and cunning can overcome more rigid hierarchies.

3. Justice and moral rehabilitation

Justice in Sinhala folktales, especially those of Andare, is restorative rather than punishing. In contrast to the punishing violence of Grimm's fairy tales, Andare tales value social harmony more than punishment. In many stories, Andare resolves conflicts through clever deception rather than overt punishment.

Loy (2009) considers the Buddhist model of justice in the Sinhala legend based on rehabilitation rather than punishment. This aligns with typical Sri Lankan cultural principles, where karma and ethical retribution are part of understandings of justice in fiction. This area of study can be expanded further to

explore the way that themes in this literature are distinct from the punishing model standard in Western fiction.

Although there has been extensive work on German fairy tales, there is relatively little comparative study of Sinhala and German folk tales, particularly concerning gender, justice, and power. Although some studies have been conducted on the hierarchical and moral structure of the Grimm fairy tales, there is little examination of how Sinhala folk tales, particularly the Andare tales, offer alternative models of social critique and justice.

While German folk tales have been extensively studied from a feminist and socio-political perspective, there has been little similar research on Sinhala folk tales. Subsequent research could explore how the gender roles in Andare folk tales compare with those in the Grimm folk tales, with a focus on female agency and moral wisdom.

Although German and Sinhala legal traditions differ significantly, there is a need to explore how far this is made possible by an overarching cultural and philosophical background. An interdisciplinary exploration of narratives, such as anthropology, gender studies and comparative literature, may provide insightful information on transcultural narrative traditions.

Methodology

This study is a comparative literary critical analysis of power, justice and gender themes in Sinhala and German folktales. The research is concerned with the analysis of the power, justice and gender themes in a variety of folktales to analyse how social values are reflected through these themes in the culture of Germany and Sri Lanka. By analysing these texts on a thematic level, comparisons and contrasts between the depiction of these fundamental foundations of social life in the two traditions will be drawn. By a comparative approach, the study will gain a deeper understanding of how folklore functions as a tool of culture and affects social attitudes towards gender roles, power relations and legal systems.

The materials for this research are German fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and Sinhala folk tales, in particular those of the Andare tradition, and other culturally significant stories. The selection has been made based on the thematic richness of the fairy tales and the influence they have had on the respective cultures. The German fairy tales selected for this analysis are Cinderella, The Fisherman and His Wife, The Golden Goose, Rumpelstiltskin and Snow White. These tales are most important for their portrayals of femininity, power conflicts and moral justice. The selection of stories was guided by two primary considerations. All tales analysed are well-known within their respective traditions and have been subject to popular retelling or academic interest. Stories were selected based on their engagement with at least one of the core themes under study, particularly where characters' actions and outcomes clearly reflect cultural perspectives on power structures, gender roles, or moral justice.

The Sinhala folktales contain a set of Andare stories and other important stories like Andare and the King, Andare and the Judge, Andare and the Elephant, The Tale of the Kumari and The Cunning Thief. The Andare stories are famous for their wit and social satire and provide fascinating insights into Sri Lankan attitudes to power and justice. This choice guarantees that both conventional and subversive stories are taken into account, offering a broad spectrum of views on gender roles, power and moral justice.

This study is primarily based on secondary material, i.e., published translations, academic articles and critical analyses of folktales and fairy tales. The original texts in German and Sinhala will be cited wherever possible to enable proper interpretation of meanings, symbols and cultural context. Besides

these, research studies on gender, power dynamics, justice in folklore, and comparative folklore studies will also be incorporated into the study. This multi-disciplinary approach allows for a more comprehensive examination of the issues at hand.

The research will employ a thematic analytical approach, examining the narratives along the themes of gender, power, and justice. It will examine how the male and female characters are depicted, to what degree they conform to the usual gender roles of passivity and beauty for women and strength and leadership for men. The inquiry will also examine if women just accept their destiny or have control over it, and how agency by men and women is expressed in their respective cultures. In terms of power, it will examine how this is represented in the tales, in particular regarding kings, queens, tricksters and supernatural figures, and whether power is born, acquired or stolen. It will also consider whether power is linked to physical strength, wisdom or wit, and whether women achieve power through attractiveness, intellect or martyrdom. In terms of justice, we shall look at the way right and wrong are created in the stories, and whether rewards and punishments for good and evil deeds are distributed fairly. It also discusses whether justice in the stories sustains authority or resists power structures. For example, even though the Andare stories usually satirise authority figures, the Grimm fairy tales usually depict justice as divine punishment.

The study performs a comparative thematic analysis of the selected fairy tales based on the main differences and similarities. The comparisons are made based on character roles, power relations and legal systems in the German and Sinhala folktales. The comparison of characters such as Cinderella and Kumari or Andare and Rumpelstiltskin sheds light on gender role constructions and social mobility in the cultures. The representation of power, for instance, by kings, judges and thieves, helps one understand how these cultures view and settle power relations. Finally, Grimm's fairy tale moralistic justice, in which justice rewards good and punishes bad, is compared with Andare stories' subversive justice, in which authority can be humiliated and overthrown.

A qualitative approach is applied to study the narrative meaning of selected fairy tales. This involves a close reading of all the tales to identify significant passages that show gender, power and justice themes. Contextual interpretation analyses the historical, social and cultural background of the German and Sinhalese folklore traditions to identify what the underlying sense of the tales is. Comparative interpretation contrasts differences and similarities of dealing with gender, power and justice in the two traditions according to a programmatic approach. It draws links between the narrative culture of Europe and South Asia.

Though this research is meant to be an all-encompassing comparative study, it is not without some limitations. Firstly, the research is limited to a particular set of folktales and fairy tales. Though the selected fairy tales represent typical characteristics, they do not represent the entirety of the German and Sinhala folk traditions. Second, specific details of the fairy tales cannot be compared literally due to linguistic and cultural variations and must be carefully interpreted. The German fairy tales were gathered in the 19th century, while the Sinhala ones were passed down by word of mouth for centuries.

Discussion and Findings

Here is a thematic analysis of the selected German fairy tales and Sinhala folk tales with the three themes of gender, power and justice under consideration. By comparing the representation of these themes within the two traditions, we can determine the underlying cultural values and social norms within these tales and reflect on how they may shape societal perception of morality, behaviour and social order.

Gender: Agency and Role Models

German children's tales:

In Germanic folklore, particularly the Brothers Grimm's stories, gender roles are stereotypically and binary given with definite qualities imposed on femininity and masculinity. Female protagonists are generally introduced as passive, pretty and morally good, while male protagonists display active qualities such as strength, cleverness or wisdom.

Snow White and Cinderella are stereotypical representations of femininity and passive characters. They actively suffer abuse (at the hands of stepsisters or stepmothers) and are rewarded for being virtuous and patient afterwards. All they do is exercise their moral agency by retaining their moral character and beauty, which ultimately leads them to victory. Snow White is depicted as innocent, lovely and submissive, waiting to be saved by outside forces (the prince), validating a model of gendered passivity.

As a substitute, German fairy tales have their male characters existing as more active in life, quite frequently embarking on journeys, resisting trials or overcoming through adversity by quick wit and physical strength. The classic hero journey tends to point to the ideal masculine role: free, commanding and able to exercise authority. In stories like Hansel and Gretel, the brother uses cunning in order for the sister to survive, defining masculinity as resourceful and guarding their care.

Sinhala Folk Stories (Andare Tales):

Sinhala folklore, especially the Andare trickster stories, demonstrates a more complex perception of gender roles, with women being granted more agency and subverting traditional norms.

While most traditional Sinhala folktales concentrate on women's wisdom, domesticity and self-sacrifice, some depict women in more active and capable roles. In the Kumari tale, for example, the heroine uses cunning and cleverness to overcome her enemies, subverting the stereotypical image of women as passive agents. This shows that even in the case of traditional tales, women are more active. The power of women in these tales to affect things through wit and cleverness allows them more agency than the female characters in German fairy tales.

As a male trickster, Andare makes light of traditional gender roles and gendered expectations for women and men. In his meeting with kings, nobles and commoners, Andare crosses hierarchies and points to the ridiculousness of rigid gender roles. His playful disrespect for authority figures illustrates a more flexible model of gender and power relations in which both men and women can subvert norms.

The comparison between these two traditions implies a divergence in culture as far as conceptualising gender is concerned. German fairy tales are strict when it comes to gender roles. However, Sinhala folktales, especially those of Andare, can be negotiated and flexible in terms of conceptualising gender and social roles.

Power: Authority and Subversion

German fairy stories:

German folk tales traditionally depict power as an authoritarian system in which agents of power are usually unchallenged and dominate others. Classical power dynamics based on divine order, beauty and virtue are reaffirmed in German folk tales.

Power in the majority of fairy tales is inherited or given from outside, i.e., from divine or supernatural forces. In Cinderella, the heroine is given power (in terms of wealth and status) once she demonstrates her worth. In The Fisherman and His Wife, power is similarly attained magically (the fish grants wishes), but the woman's greedy hunger for greater power results in her ultimate downfall, highlighting the dangers of unchecked ambition and the need for humility in aspiring to power.

The penalty for overturning the natural order is harsh. In *The Goose Girl*, the servant who betrays the princess is severely punished. This is a case of a justice based on maintaining authority and hierarchy, where any deviation from the set power structure is rewarded with punishment.

Sinhala Folk Stories (Andare Tales)

Conversely, the concept of power in the Sinhala folktales is not so rigidly institutionalised or fixed. Andare's character presents an intriguing figure for power and authority studies as he constantly disrupts traditional hierarchies.

Andare's status as royal jester is central to this subversion. He uses humour and wit to subtly challenge kings and other authority figures, pointing out their weaknesses and the capricious nature of their rule. Power becomes seen as negotiable in Andare's stories, rather than the more rigid power structures of German fairy tales, where kings and queens exercise unproblematic power. With wit and humour, Andare shows that power is not fixed, but can be shaped and challenged by those who are intelligent enough.

Andare's wit to circumvent powerful characters reflects a cultural bias towards social criticism and commentary. In folktales, authority is not seen as untouchable but criticised using satire and humour. This reflects the importance of improvisability in social power dynamics, whereby humour and cleverness can overturn or upend the social order.

The representation of power in Sinhala folk stories, particularly in Andares' satire, illustrates a more active understanding of power, whereby power can be reshaped or challenged by the outsiders of society. German fairy tales, in contrast, emphasise stability and support the idea that power, once established, stays the same and cannot be challenged.

Justice: Moral Order and Social Critique

German Fairy Tales:

Justice in German fairy tales is usually presented as strict divine retribution according to the moral order of society. People are rewarded or punished according to their moral character, with good and evil clearly defined.

In these fairy tales, good characters (e.g., Cinderella or Snow White) are rewarded for their goodness, whereas evil characters (e.g., the evil stepmother or evil sisters) are punished severely. The legal code in these fairy tales is closely aligned with the moral order, wherein actions are evaluated based on their moral value, and there is limited space for redress or forgiveness.

In fairy tales such as *The Goose Girl*, immoral acts are severely punished, bringing out the idea that justice must be severe in order to promote social harmony. This suggests a hierarchical conception of society in which the existing moral order is maintained through punishment.

Sinhala Folk Stories (Andare Tales):

In Sinhala tradition, justice is often presented as restorative and adaptive, with an emphasis on balance and social harmony rather than strict retribution. In Andare stories, conflicts are often resolved through cleverness and cunning rather than punishment. When, for example, Andare is faced with corrupt or unjust rulers, his responses are less about punishment and more about restoring balance through social satire. Such justice is in line with Buddhist ethics, where karma is a key element in the morality of actions.

Moral rehabilitation, not disciplinary punishment, is the focus of Sinhala folktales. Characters who misbehave are punished, but the punishment is typically symbolic or corrective. This is a restorative

model of justice, with punishment not as the goal but as the restoration of moral equilibrium and social harmony.

The different types of justice in these cultures illustrate cultural variation. German fairy tales require a strict moral order in which retributive justice upholds social norms. In Sinhalese folktales, justice is often portrayed as a less strict, restorative justice.

Thematic Comparison

The thematic analysis of gender, power and justice manifests apparent differences between German fairy tales and Sinhalese folk tales. They both deal with these issues, although in a culturally specific way, reflecting their social arrangements and moral values.

German fairy tales tend to reinforce traditional norms of stable gender roles, hierarchical power structures and egalitarian justice. The stories confirm the notion of a stable moral order in which good is rewarded and evil punished, and in which power structures are stable.

Sinhala folktales, especially those of Andare, show a more subversive and fluid handling of these themes. Gender roles are more flexible, power hierarchies are more fluid, and justice tends to be restorative rather than punishing. These tales indicate a cultural preference for social critique, flexibility and subversion of received norms.

Conclusion

This comparative study explored how German fairy tales and Sinhalese folk tales depict and construct social attitudes towards gender, power and justice. A reading of some selected fairy tales revealed that although each tradition addresses the same issues, it does so in culturally specific ways that reflect their respective social worlds and moral thought.

German fairy tales affirm traditional social roles, power structures and justice, and describe them as good or evil based on their orientation towards the king and equate equal justice. They enforce a vertical concept of society with power inherited by virtue and with immovable gender roles which depict women as passive and waiting for male intervention in order to be transformed.

In contrast, Sinhala folk tradition, in the form of the trickster stories of Andare, presents a more negotiable and subversive gender and a vision of power and justice. Andare's cleverness and humour undercut authority and social hierarchies and propound an egalitarian and negotiable vision of power. Justice in Sinhala folk tradition is restorative, and disagreements are resolved through wisdom, not punishment, and this conforms to the culture of emphasis on karma and soul restoration.

By highlighting both similarities and differences in the treatment of these themes in German and Sinhala texts, the study contributes to an understanding of the manner in which folklore reflects cultural values and social organisation. It also serves to highlight the usefulness of cross-cultural comparison in examining the manner in which folklore constructs and affects social attitudes towards gender, authority and justice. Through the comparison of various twos, we can better understand the diversity and universality of narrative traditions and their active part in shaping worldviews throughout time and space.

Although this study provides an interesting comparative analysis, there are several areas where further research would be beneficial. Future research could address the following issues.

1. The role of folklore in contemporary societies, examining how traditional stories are reinterpreted and continue to shape existing social norms in terms of gender, power and justice.

2. Further exploration of intersectionality, examining how class, ethnicity and religion influence the representation of gender roles and power relations in folklore.
3. The role of oral traditions in the building of gender and power narratives, and particularly how narratives shift over time and how the voices of marginalised groups are incorporated or excluded within such narratives.

In sum, this study provides an effective model for understanding folklore as a vehicle for cultural transmission and for the construction of social norms, behaviours and attitudes regarding justice, gender and power. In examining these oral traditions, we learn not only about German and Sri Lankan cultures but also about the cross-cultural nature of storytelling and how it can construct and reflect the values of a society.

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