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STYLISTIC PATTERNS AND THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN ENGLISH FAIRY TALE NARRATIVES

Makhdoom Hussain
M.Phil. English Literature, Lahore leads university, Lahore, Pakistan.
makhdoommaharvi@gmail.com
Nabiha Aslam
M.A. English Language and Literature (Gold Medalist), Bahaudddin Zakariya University Multan, Sub Campus Layyah
nabihabajwa392@gmail.com
Riffat Rasheed
Assistant Professor of English, Higher Education Department, Punjab, Pakistan
riffat.islahuddin@gmail.com

Abstract
This study examines the stylistic patterns and discursive construction of gender in six English fairy tale narratives: Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Sleeping Beauty (contemporary reimagining), Little Red Riding Hood, Beauty and the Beast, and Rapunzel. Using a qualitative stylistic and discourse-analytic approach, the research explores how linguistic features such as lexical choices, transitivity patterns, dialogue structures, and narrative organisation contribute to the representation of gender roles. The findings reveal that traditional fairy tales consistently construct femininity through passivity, beauty, obedience, and emotional labour, while masculinity is associated with agency, authority, and control. Female characters are often positioned as recipients of actions, with their success dependent on external intervention, particularly male rescue. In contrast, male characters drive narrative progression and resolution. However, the contemporary reimagining of Sleeping Beauty challenges these conventions by presenting a more agentive female protagonist and a more egalitarian model of masculinity. Across the texts, binary oppositions between "good" and "bad" femininity are reinforced, and marriage is frequently depicted as the ultimate resolution of female identity. The study concludes that while traditional fairy tales perpetuate patriarchal ideologies through stylistic and discursive means, modern reinterpretations offer alternative frameworks that emphasise autonomy, resistance, and gender equality.

Keywords: gender construction, stylistic analysis, discourse analysis, fairy tales, femininity and masculinity

1. Introduction

Fairy tales have long functioned as powerful cultural narratives that shape social values, moral expectations, and gender ideologies. As one of the earliest forms of literary exposure for children, these narratives play a crucial role in influencing how individuals perceive gender roles and social identities from an early age (Zipes, 1983; Warner, 1995). Traditionally, English fairy tales present a world populated by princes, princesses, witches, and heroes, where gendered behaviours are not only depicted but also normalised through repeated narrative patterns and linguistic choices. These recurring representations contribute to what scholars describe as the discursive construction of gender, where language becomes a tool for reinforcing socially constructed identities and power relations (Fairclough, 1995).

From a stylistic perspective, fairy tales are particularly rich sites for analysing how gender is encoded through lexical choices, narrative structures, and descriptive patterns. Studies have shown that male and female characters are often differentiated through specific linguistic markers, such as adjectives and action verbs, which assign agency, passivity, strength, or beauty along gendered lines (Leech & Short, 2007; Mills, 1995). For instance, female characters are frequently described in terms of physical appearance and moral virtue, while male characters are associated with action, authority, and heroism. Such stylistic patterns are not neutral; rather,

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they actively participate in constructing and perpetuating gender ideologies embedded within the discourse of fairy tales (Simpson, 2004).

Moreover, the discursive dimension of fairy tales reveals how language operates within broader socio-cultural frameworks. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been widely employed to uncover implicit meanings and ideological assumptions in these narratives, demonstrating how gender roles are naturalised through storytelling conventions (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). These narratives often position women as passive, obedient, and dependent, whereas men are portrayed as dominant, rational, and powerful figures, reinforcing traditional patriarchal structures (Zipes, 1983; Warner, 1995). Such representations are not merely reflective of historical contexts but also contribute to the reproduction of gender norms across generations.

In addition, contemporary research highlights that the gendered discourse of fairy tales is not limited to thematic representation but extends deeply into narrative organisation and character roles. Corpus-based and comparative studies have revealed a consistent imbalance in character distribution, narrative agency, and moral alignment, with male characters often occupying central, active roles and female characters being relegated to supportive or secondary positions (Baker, 2006; Sunderland, 2004). These patterns demonstrate how discourse structures shape readers' cognitive frameworks regarding gender expectations.

Importantly, fairy tales also serve as ideological tools that mediate cultural values and social hierarchies. Through repetitive exposure, these narratives influence children's understanding of what is considered appropriate behaviour for men and women, embedding stereotypes that persist into adulthood (Mills, 1995; Sunderland, 2004). The association of femininity with beauty, passivity, and virtue, and masculinity with strength and dominance, reflects deeply rooted cultural assumptions that are subtly reinforced through narrative discourse.

At the same time, recent linguistic and literary studies have begun to challenge traditional interpretations by examining variations across time and adaptations. Analyses of different versions of fairy tales reveal shifts in stylistic and discursive strategies, suggesting that gender representation is not fixed but evolves in response to changing social contexts (Bacchilega, 1997; Zipes, 2012). This diachronic perspective highlights the dynamic nature of discourse and its role in negotiating gender identities.

Therefore, examining stylistic patterns alongside discursive strategies provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how gender is constructed, represented, and perpetuated in English fairy tale narratives. By integrating linguistic analysis with discourse-oriented approaches, this study aims to uncover the subtle yet powerful ways in which language shapes gender ideologies, offering insights into the intersection of literature, language, and social structure.

1.1 Research Objectives

1. To analyse the stylistic patterns (e.g., vocabulary, descriptive language, and narrative techniques) used to depict male and female characters in English fairy tales.
2. To examine how discourse in fairy tales constructs and perpetuates gender ideologies and power relations.
3. To compare the representation of gender roles by identifying differences in agency, roles, and characterisation between male and female characters.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How do stylistic features such as lexical choices, adjectives, and narrative structures contribute to the representation of gender in English fairy tale narratives?
2. In what ways do discursive strategies construct and reinforce traditional gender roles in English fairy tales?

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

3. How do male and female characters differ in terms of agency, characterisation, and linguistic representation within these narratives?

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it contributes to the growing body of research in stylistics and discourse analysis by exploring how language shapes and reinforces gender ideologies in literary texts. By focusing on English fairy tales, the research highlights the subtle yet powerful role of linguistic choices in constructing gendered identities and normalising societal expectations. The findings will be useful for scholars in linguistics, literary studies, and gender studies, as well as educators who engage with children's literature, as they raise awareness about implicit gender biases embedded in widely consumed narratives. Moreover, the study provides a critical framework for re-evaluating traditional texts and encourages more inclusive and balanced representations of gender in contemporary storytelling.

2. Literature Review

The study of gender representation in fairy tales has attracted sustained scholarly attention across disciplines such as linguistics, literary studies, and discourse analysis. Fairy tales are not merely forms of entertainment; rather, they function as cultural artefacts that transmit social norms, values, and ideologies, particularly those related to gender roles. Scholars argue that these narratives play a formative role in shaping children's perceptions of identity and social expectations through repeated exposure to stereotypical characterisations and narrative patterns (Gul & Baig, 2025; Siddiqui, 2021). As a result, the discursive construction of gender in fairy tales has become a critical area of investigation, especially within stylistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

Early foundational studies in fairy tale research emphasised structural and thematic elements, often neglecting linguistic features. However, more recent scholarship has shifted toward examining how language itself contributes to gender construction. Levorato (2003) highlights that linguistic structures, narrative voice, and stylistic organisation play a significant role in shaping gender ideologies embedded within fairy tales. This linguistic turn has enabled researchers to explore how discourse operates not only at the level of content but also through stylistic choices such as lexical selection, syntax, and narrative sequencing.

A recurring theme in the literature is the persistence of gender stereotypes in traditional fairy tales. Numerous studies demonstrate that male characters are typically associated with agency, power, and action, whereas female characters are depicted as passive, beautiful, and dependent (Pawłowska, 2021; Budidarma et al., 2023). These stereotypical portrayals are reinforced through narrative conventions, such as the "damsel in distress" trope, which positions female characters as recipients of male heroism. Such representations reflect and perpetuate patriarchal ideologies that normalise gender hierarchies within society.

From a discourse analytical perspective, fairy tales are seen as sites where gender identities are constructed through language and narrative practices. Critical Discourse Analysis has been widely applied to uncover implicit meanings and ideological assumptions in these texts. For example, Gul and Baig (2025) argue that fairy tales encode gendered messages that shape children's understanding of social roles, often presenting males as dominant and females as submissive. Similarly, Siddiqui (2021) emphasises that fairy tales reinforce associations between beauty and virtue for female characters, while linking masculinity with strength and heroism. These discursive patterns contribute to the naturalisation of gender norms, making them appear inherent rather than socially constructed.

Stylistic analysis has further revealed how specific linguistic features contribute to gender representation. One significant area of focus is the use of adjectives and descriptive language. Cress (2016) demonstrates that female characters are frequently described using adjectives related to appearance and emotional states, whereas male characters are characterised through

ISSN E: 2709-8273
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JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

action-oriented and competence-based descriptors. This distinction highlights how language encodes gendered expectations, reinforcing the idea that women are valued for their physical attributes while men are valued for their actions and achievements.

In addition to lexical choices, narrative structure plays a crucial role in shaping gender representation. Studies have shown that male characters often occupy central roles in the narrative, driving the plot forward through their actions, while female characters are relegated to secondary or supportive roles (Budidarma et al., 2023; Pawłowska, 2021). This imbalance in narrative agency reflects broader societal power dynamics, where men are positioned as active agents and women as passive participants.

Recent advancements in computational linguistics have further expanded the scope of gender analysis in fairy tales. Large-scale studies using natural language processing techniques have identified consistent patterns of gender bias across diverse cultural contexts. For instance, Zhou et al. (2022) found that male characters are significantly more prevalent than female characters in fairy tale corpora and are associated with actions related to authority and violence, while female characters are linked to emotions, domestic activities, and appearance. These findings provide quantitative support for earlier qualitative analyses, reinforcing the argument that gender bias is deeply embedded in narrative structures.

Similarly, Toro Isaza et al. (2023) examine gender bias through the lens of narrative event chains, demonstrating that male and female characters participate in different types of events, which further reinforces stereotypical roles. Such studies highlight the importance of examining not only what characters do but also how their actions are structured within the narrative. This approach aligns with stylistic analysis, which emphasises the role of narrative sequencing and linguistic patterns in meaning-making.

Another important strand of research focuses on the ideological function of fairy tales as tools of socialisation. Fairy tales are often one of the first forms of literature encountered by children, making them powerful instruments for transmitting cultural values. Gul and Baig (2025) note that these narratives shape children's cognitive frameworks, influencing their perceptions of gender roles and social expectations. The repeated exposure to stereotypical representations can lead to the internalisation of gender norms, which persist into adulthood.

Feminist scholars have critically examined the role of fairy tales in perpetuating patriarchal ideologies. They argue that traditional narratives often marginalise female voices and limit the representation of women to narrow roles. Syahrul et al. (2025) highlight how female characters are often depicted in relation to their roles within the family, emphasising obedience and domesticity. This reflects broader cultural expectations that prioritise women's roles as caregivers and subordinates.

At the same time, some studies have explored variations and transformations in gender representation across different versions and adaptations of fairy tales. Levorato (2003) demonstrates that modern retellings often challenge traditional gender roles by presenting more active and independent female characters. This suggests that gender representation in fairy tales is not static but evolves in response to changing social and cultural contexts.

Moreover, interdisciplinary approaches have enriched the analysis of gender in fairy tales by integrating insights from linguistics, sociology, and psychology. For example, stylistic analysis provides a detailed examination of linguistic features, while discourse analysis situates these features within broader social and ideological frameworks. Together, these approaches offer a comprehensive understanding of how gender is constructed and represented in narrative texts.

Despite the growing body of research, several gaps remain in the literature. Much of the existing work focuses on thematic and content-based analysis, with less attention given to the interplay between stylistic features and discourse structures. Additionally, while computational studies provide valuable insights into large-scale patterns, they often lack the nuanced

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

interpretation offered by qualitative analysis. Therefore, there is a need for integrated approaches that combine stylistic and discourse analytical methods to examine gender representation in fairy tales more comprehensively.

Furthermore, most studies focus on Western fairy tales, particularly those from the Grimm and Perrault traditions, limiting the scope of analysis. Expanding the corpus to include diverse cultural narratives could provide a more nuanced understanding of how gender is constructed across different contexts. This would also address the issue of cultural bias in existing research and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of fairy tale discourse.

In conclusion from the above literature we can say that fairy tales play a significant role in shaping and reinforcing gender ideologies through both stylistic and discursive means. Linguistic features such as lexical choices, adjectives, and narrative structures contribute to the construction of gendered identities, while discourse practices embed these identities within broader social frameworks. The persistence of gender stereotypes in fairy tales highlights the need for critical analysis and reinterpretation of these narratives. By integrating stylistic analysis with discourse-oriented approaches, future research can provide deeper insights into the complex relationship between language, literature, and gender.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the stylistic patterns and discursive construction of gender in English fairy tale narratives. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting linguistic features, narrative structures, and underlying ideologies embedded in texts rather than measuring numerical data. The research integrates stylistic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language constructs gender roles. Stylistics enables the examination of lexical choices, descriptive patterns, and narrative techniques, while CDA helps uncover the ideological meanings and power relations embedded in discourse.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks. First, stylistic theory, particularly the model proposed by Geoffrey Leech and Mick Short (2007), is used to analyse linguistic features such as vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and figures of speech. This model provides a systematic approach to examining how language creates meaning in literary texts.

Second, the study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as developed by Norman Fairclough (1995), which focuses on the relationship between language, ideology, and power. CDA allows the researcher to explore how gender identities are constructed and normalised through discourse and how these representations reflect broader socio-cultural structures.

3.3 Data Collection

The data for this study consist of six well-known English fairy tales selected through purposive sampling. These texts are chosen due to their popularity, cultural influence, and frequent use in studies of gender representation. The selected fairy tales are:

1. Cinderella
2. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs
3. Sleeping Beauty
4. Little Red Riding Hood
5. Beauty and the Beast
6. Rapunzel

These fairy tales are primarily drawn from the collections of the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault, which are considered canonical texts in the tradition of English-translated fairy tales. The selected texts provide a rich dataset for examining recurring stylistic and discursive patterns of gender representation.

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis is conducted in two interconnected stages:

1. Stylistic Analysis

The first stage focuses on identifying and analysing stylistic features in the selected fairy tales using the framework of Leech and Short (2007). The analysis includes:

- **Lexical Analysis**: Examination of adjectives, nouns, and verbs used to describe male and female characters
- **Grammatical Structures**: Analysis of sentence structures, voice (active/passive), and transitivity patterns
- **Figurative Language**: Identification of metaphors, similes, and symbolic expressions associated with gender
- **Narrative Techniques**: Analysis of characterisation, point of view, and narrative roles

This stage aims to reveal how linguistic choices contribute to the portrayal of gendered identities.

2. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The second stage applies Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA:

- **Textual Analysis**: Close reading of the language used in the texts
- **Discursive Practice**: Examination of how the texts are produced and interpreted within cultural contexts
- **Social Practice**: Analysis of the broader ideological and social implications of gender representation

This stage focuses on uncovering implicit meanings, power relations, and ideological assumptions embedded in the narratives.

3.5 Sampling Technique

The study uses purposive sampling, selecting texts that are widely recognised and frequently analysed in literary and linguistic research. This ensures that the data are relevant, representative, and rich in gendered discourse.

3.6 Research Approach

The research follows an interpretive approach, emphasising in-depth textual analysis and critical interpretation. Rather than generalising findings statistically, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how gender is constructed through language and discourse.

3.7 Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to six selected fairy tales and may not represent all variations of fairy tale narratives across cultures. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the research means that findings are interpretive and may vary depending on the analytical perspective. Future research may expand the dataset or incorporate quantitative methods for broader generalisation.

4. Data Analysis

This section analyses six selected fairy tales to examine how stylistic patterns and discursive strategies construct gender roles. The analysis is based on lexical choices, characterisation, narrative roles, and ideological implications. Each tale is examined individually.

4.1 *Cinderella*

1. Lexical and Stylistic Analysis

The linguistic structure of *Cinderella* clearly reflects gendered patterns through adjectives, verbs, and descriptive expressions. Cinderella is repeatedly associated with negative and passive descriptors such as *"poor," "a mess,"* and *"dirty clothes."* For instance, the line, *"Poor Cinderella had to work hard all day long so the others could rest,"* positions her within a semantic field of suffering, labour, and subordination. The adjective *"poor"* constructs her identity as weak and oppressed, reinforcing feminine vulnerability.

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

Similarly, the repeated sentence structure *"It was she who had to wake up… It was she who cooked… It was she who kept the fire going.* "demonstrates syntactic parallelism, emphasising her continuous domestic labour. This stylistic repetition foregrounds her role as a caregiver and servant, aligning with traditional feminine expectations. In contrast, the prince is associated with agency and authority, as seen in *"He picked up her glass slipper and rushed out the door." "From hut to hut… went the Prince."* The use of dynamic verbs such as *picked up*, *rushed*, and *went* constructs masculinity as active and goal-oriented.

2. Characterisation and Representation

Cinderella's characterisation is built on passivity, patience, and inner virtue. Despite mistreatment, she remains obedient: *"Have a good time!" called Cinderella.* This reflects a discourse of ideal femininity, where women are expected to be kind and self-sacrificing even under oppression. Her transformation is not self-driven but externally granted:

"Your Fairy Godmother… has come to grant it."

This indicates that female success depends on external intervention, not personal agency. The prince, on the other hand, is portrayed as decisive and powerful:

"When I find it, I will find her… Then I will ask her to be my bride!"

Here, the prince controls both the search and the outcome, reinforcing male dominance in decision-making.

3. Narrative Structure and Agency

The narrative structure of the fairy tale places Cinderella in a reactive role, while the prince drives the resolution. Even during the ball, *"They danced… and yet again."* Cinderella participates, but the narrative focus shifts quickly to the prince's perception and actions. The climax of the story, the search for the glass slipper, is entirely controlled by the prince. *"From hut to hut… went the Prince."* This reinforces the idea that male agency determines narrative closure, while female identity is revealed rather than constructed.

4. Discursive Construction of Gender

From a discourse perspective, the text normalises patriarchal gender roles. Women are categorised into binary roles:

- Good woman (Cinderella): passive, kind, beautiful
- Bad women (stepmother and stepsisters): aggressive, loud, dominant

For example: *"'Faster!' shouted one step-sister." "'You call that a dress?' screamed the other."* The verbs *shouted* and *screamed* construct dominant female voices negatively, suggesting that assertive femininity is undesirable. In contrast, Cinderella's quiet voice, *"Oh, dear!"* is framed positively, reinforcing submissiveness as ideal.

5. Symbolism and Ideology

The glass slipper serves as a symbolic object of identity and femininity: *"It fit perfectly!"* It represents uniqueness but also physical suitability, linking female worth to bodily perfection.

The transformation scene:

"She was dressed in a beautiful blue gown." reinforces the idea that beauty is essential for social mobility and recognition, especially for women.

4.2 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*

1. Lexical Choices and Gender Representation

The lexical patterns in the tale strongly construct traditional gender roles through repeated emphasis on beauty, innocence, and emotional vulnerability for the female character.

For example:

"Snow White is the fairest of them all!"

The repeated use of the adjective *"fairest"* foregrounds physical beauty as the primary value of femininity. Snow White's identity is constructed almost entirely around her appearance rather than her intellect or agency.

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

Similarly:

"She was scratched, bleeding, and scared"

This lexical cluster reinforces female fragility and vulnerability, presenting Snow White as physically weak and emotionally dependent. In contrast, the Queen is described using negative emotional and evaluative vocabulary: "*Rage filled the Queen's body"* "She screamed" Here, language constructs the powerful woman as dangerous and unstable, reinforcing a binary opposition between the "good passive female" and the "evil active female."

2. Agency and Transitivity Patterns

From a transitivity perspective (Halliday's analysis), Snow White is often positioned as a receiver of actions rather than an initiator. Example: *"The huntsman took Snow White into the woods" "She was ordered to be killed* "Snow White appears as the grammatical object, not the subject, which reflects her lack of control over events. Even when she acts, her agency is limited to domestic or nurturing roles: "Maybe if I clean up around here" "I can teach everyone" These material processes reinforce traditional feminine roles of caregiving and domestic labour. By contrast, the Queen is frequently the actor in material processes. *"The Queen decided to be rid of the girl. "She called for her servant"*. This shows that power and agency are linguistically assigned to the antagonist, but framed negatively.

3. Speech and Dialogue Patterns

Dialogue reveals hierarchical and gendered power relations. The Queen uses imperative structures*: "Find a reason to take Snow White… Moreover, kill her."* This authoritative tone reflects institutional and political power, yet it is morally condemned. Snow White's speech, however, is marked by politeness and submissiveness: *"How nice of you" "I would have to do something for all of you".* Her language reflects cooperation, gratitude, and emotional labour, reinforcing stereotypical feminine discourse.

4. Representation of Masculinity

Male characters (the huntsman, dwarfs, and the Prince) are constructed differently.

The Huntsman:

"I cannot do this!" He demonstrates moral conflict, positioning masculinity as capable of compassion but still active in decision-making.

The Seven Dwarfs:

"*Stay here with us".* They occupy a protective and supportive role, yet still hold authority over space and rules:

"You must not open the door to anyone". This reflects male control over female mobility and safety.

The Prince:

"The Prince… kissed her"

The Prince embodies the ultimate agent of resolution. Snow White's revival depends entirely on his action, reinforcing the trope of female passivity and male rescue.

5. Symbolism and Gender Ideology

Several symbolic elements reinforce gender ideology:

The Mirror:

"Mirror, mirror on the wall…"

The mirror symbolises patriarchal standards of beauty, where women are valued through external validation.

The Apple:

"The fruit was poisoned"

The apple represents female vulnerability to deception, echoing broader cultural narratives of women as naive.

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

The Glass Coffin:

"She stayed absolutely still"

This image reinforces extreme passivity, where even in death-like sleep, the female body is preserved for male gaze and rescue.

6. Domesticity and Gender Roles

Snow White's acceptance into the dwarfs' home is conditional upon her domestic contribution: "If I were to stay here, I would have to do something for all of you."

She then assumes roles such as:

- Cleaning
- Cooking
- Teaching

This reflects the discourse of female usefulness through service, aligning with traditional gender expectations.

7. Ideological Closure and Gender Norm Reinforcement

The ending reinforces traditional gender ideology:

"They were married and lived happily ever after."

Marriage is presented as the ultimate goal and reward for the female protagonist. Snow White's identity is completed through union with the Prince, not through personal growth or autonomy.

4.3 *Sleeping Beauty (Contemporary Reimagining)*

1. Lexical Choices and the Construction of Femininity

Unlike traditional fairy tales, this version introduces resistance-oriented lexical patterns that challenge conventional gender norms.

For instance:

"I would rather prick my finger… than to marry someone I do not want!"

The use of the modal expression *"would rather"* signals strong personal agency and preference, which contrasts with traditional passive female representation. The lexical field here shifts from obedience to choice, resistance, and autonomy.

However, traditional expectations are still present through the fairies' language:

"Just do whatever your husband tells you to do"

This imperative structure reflects patriarchal ideology embedded in discourse, where femininity is equated with obedience and submission.

2. Transitivity and Agency

From a transitivity perspective, Aurora is constructed as a highly active agent, which marks a significant shift from traditional fairy tales like *Snow White*. "Aurora ran out the door" "We will go over those hills" "I must find a spinning wheel" Here, Aurora is consistently the subject performing material actions, indicating self-determination and control over her destiny. In contrast, traditional authority figures (fairies and parents) attempt to impose decisions. "*You will get married*, you must stay inside the hills" These modal verbs (will, must) reflect institutional power, but Aurora actively resists them, creating a discourse of conflict between authority and individual freedom.

3. Dialogue and Power Relations

Dialogue plays a crucial role in revealing ideological tensions.

Traditional Authority:

"Even if he is a bit strange… it hardly matters"

"You will not need to spend much time with him" These lines normalise forced marriage and emotional detachment, highlighting how patriarchal systems reduce women's roles to social obligation.

Aurora's Resistance:

"No, this is all wrong!"

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

This declarative and emphatic structure signals discursive disruption, where the female voice challenges dominant norms.

Her speech is:

- Direct
- Assertive
- Emotionally charged

This contrasts sharply with traditional fairy tale heroines who speak politely and submissively.

4. Representation of Masculinity

The Prince in this version is deconstructed from the traditional heroic saviour role.

Example:

"I should not… But yes, I will."

His hesitation reflects uncertainty rather than dominance, positioning him as cooperative rather than authoritative.

Later:

"Do you feel different?"

This line suggests emotional equality and mutual experience, rather than control or rescue.

Unlike classic narratives:

- The Prince does not save Aurora
- He does not control the outcome
- He participates in a shared journey

5. Symbolism and Ideological Shift

The Spinning Wheel:

Traditionally, a symbol of fate and female passivity, here it becomes a tool of resistance:

"I must prick my finger… and get out of this marriage"

Aurora consciously uses the curse to escape patriarchal control, reversing its original meaning.

The 100-Year Sleep:

Instead of passive suffering, the sleep symbolises:

- Temporal escape
- Hope for social change

"Maybe by the time I wake up, times will be different"

This introduces a progressive ideological layer, linking gender roles to historical transformation.

The New World:

"It was quite all right for women and men to get to know each other"

This reflects a modern egalitarian discourse, where:

- Marriage is based on choice
- Gender roles are flexible
- Relationships are mutual

6. Spatial Control and Gender

Space plays a key role in gender construction.

Restricted Space:

"She must never go beyond those hills"

This reflects traditional discourse where female mobility is restricted for protection and control.

Transgression:

"We will go over those hills"

Aurora crossing the boundary symbolises:

- Rejection of imposed limits
- Assertion of independence

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

7. Female Identity and Resistance

Aurora's identity is constructed through:

- Decision-making
- Emotional expression
- Rejection of forced norms

Example:

"This is all wrong!"

This statement acts as a discursive turning point, where the narrative shifts from compliance to resistance.

8. Transformation of Gender Ideology

Unlike traditional fairy tales, this narrative avoids reinforcing binary oppositions such as:

- Passive vs active female
- Good vs evil woman

Instead, it presents:

- A complex female subject
- A negotiated masculinity
- A shared social evolution

4.4 *Little Red Riding Hood*

1. Lexical Choices and the Construction of Femininity

The lexical patterning in the narrative constructs Little Red Riding Hood as innocent, obedient, and naïve, reinforcing traditional feminine stereotypes.

For example, "*a sweet little girl loved by everyone"*. The adjectives *"sweet"* and *"little"* infantilise the protagonist, emphasising youth, vulnerability, and purity as defining features of femininity. "She promised with a smile"

This phrase highlights compliance and politeness, aligning femininity with obedience and emotional warmth.

However, her innocence is also framed as a weakness:

"She did not know what a wicked creature he was and felt no fear at all."

This lexical construction links naivety with danger, suggesting that a lack of awareness makes female characters vulnerable.

2. Transitivity and Agency

From a transitivity perspective, Little Red Riding Hood initially appears as an active participant, but her agency is limited and easily manipulated. Examples: "Take them to your grandmother" "Do not stray from the path" These imperative structures position her as a recipient of instructions, indicating limited autonomy. When she acts independently: "She stepped off the path to gather flowers". This moment of agency is framed negatively, as it leads to danger. Thus, the narrative suggests that female independence results in vulnerability and punishment.

In contrast, the wolf dominates material processes: *"The wolf ran straight to the grandmother's house". "He swallowed her whole"* This positions masculinity (even in animal form) as active, strategic, and powerful.

3. Dialogue and Power Relations

Dialogue reveals unequal power relations between characters.

Politeness and Femininity:

"Good morning, Mr Wolf," she replied politely.

Little Red Riding Hood's formal and respectful tone reflects social expectations of female politeness, even toward strangers.

Manipulation and Masculine Control:

"Why not pick some for your grandmother?"

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

The wolf uses suggestive and persuasive language, demonstrating control through indirect speech rather than force. This highlights how power operates discursively, with manipulation rather than overt authority.

4. Representation of Masculinity

Masculinity is constructed through two contrasting figures:

The Wolf (Predatory Masculinity):

"What a tender young thing!"

The wolf's internal discourse objectifies the girl, reducing her to consumable value, which can symbolically reflect predatory male behaviour.

"I will have to be clever about it."

This shows masculinity as strategic and deceptive, reinforcing the danger posed to female innocence.

The Huntsman (Protective Masculinity):

"*He took a pair of scissors and carefully cut open the wolf's belly."*

The huntsman embodies heroic and rescuing masculinity, restoring order and saving both female characters.

Thus, masculinity is dual:

- Dangerous (wolf)
- Protective (huntsman)

5. Symbolism and Gender Ideology

The Forest:

The forest represents a space of danger and moral testing, especially for female characters.

"She wandered deeper and deeper into the forest"

This symbolises deviation from social norms, particularly obedience.

The Path:

"Do not stray from the path"

The path symbolises social rules and moral expectations, especially for women. Straying from it leads to punishment.

The Red Hood:

The red hood can symbolise:

- Innocence combined with emerging sexuality
- Visibility and vulnerability

It marks the girl as both distinct and exposed.

6. Female Vulnerability and Moral Instruction

The narrative clearly functions as a didactic text, teaching gendered behaviour.

"From now on, I'll never wander from the path again"

This reinforces the lesson that:

- Women must be obedient and cautious
- Disobedience leads to danger

The story constructs femininity as something that must be regulated and disciplined.

7. Passive Female Roles

Both female characters (Little Red Riding Hood and the grandmother) are portrayed as victims: "*He swallowed her whole" "Little Red Riding Hood… trembling but unharmed".* They lack the power to save themselves, relying on male intervention.

This reinforces the discourse of:

- **Female helplessness**
- **Male rescue as a necessity**

8. Transformation and Moral Closure

Unlike the other tales, this story includes a learning arc:

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

"This time, Little Red Riding Hood was wiser"
This suggests that:

- Femininity can be corrected through experience
- Obedience becomes internalised

The second encounter shows increased caution:
"They locked the door tight"
This indicates a shift toward collective female awareness, though still within protective boundaries.

4.5 Beauty and the Beast

1. Construction of Feminine Virtue through Language

The narrative constructs femininity through virtue, patience, and self-sacrifice, primarily embodied by Beauty. The stylistic choice of adjectives and narrative framing positions her as morally superior.
"She is such a sweet-tempered creature who speaks kindly to everyone, rich or poor."
This description reinforces a discursive pattern where femininity is equated with kindness and humility. Beauty's identity is not defined by power or independence, but by emotional and moral qualities. The repetition of descriptors like *"sweet-tempered," "gracious,"* and *"kind"* creates a linguistic pattern of ideal womanhood.
Additionally, Beauty's willingness to sacrifice herself reflects a gendered expectation:
"I will deliver myself up to all his fury… my death will save my father's life.". Here, self-sacrifice becomes a defining feminine trait, constructed through dramatic and emotive language.

2. Passive Female Agency and Moral Strength

Although Beauty appears submissive, the narrative subtly constructs her as morally powerful through dialogue and internal reasoning.
"I cannot tell a lie… I believe you are very good-natured."
This statement shows honesty and moral clarity, reinforcing a discourse where women possess ethical authority rather than social power. However, her agency remains limited within patriarchal structures: *"Is she willing to stay here with me?" "Yes, sir."* The short, submissive response reflects restricted autonomy, where her choices are framed within male authority (father and Beast). The stylistic brevity emphasises obedience.

3. Representation of Masculinity: Power, Control, and Transformation

Masculinity is initially constructed through fear, dominance, and authority, particularly in the Beast:
"Mortal! Who said you can pluck my rose?" "You must give your life for this crime!"
The use of imperative sentences and exclamatory tone creates a discourse of male power and control. However, masculinity evolves into emotional vulnerability:
"My heart is good, but still I am a monster."
This line reveals a dual construction of masculinity, where external strength contrasts with internal sensitivity. The stylistic contrast between *"heart"* and *"monster"* highlights this tension.

4. Beauty Ideology and Gender Norms

The tale reinforces traditional beauty standards, linking physical appearance with social value, especially for women. *"His daughters grew to be very beautiful…"*. The emphasis on beauty early in the narrative establishes it as a primary feminine attribute. However, the story also challenges superficial judgment through Beauty's perspective: *"Among people… many deserve the name of monster more than you do."* This line introduces a counter-discourse, suggesting that inner virtue outweighs outward appearance, though it still reinforces Beauty's role as moral evaluator rather than active agent.

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

5. Female Rivalry and Jealousy as a Gendered Trope

The sisters are constructed through negative traits such as pride, vanity, and jealousy, creating a contrast with Beauty. "They gave themselves ridiculous airs…" "They laughed at their youngest sister…" This stylistic pattern reinforces a binary opposition between 'good' and 'bad' femininity:

- Beauty = humble, virtuous
- Sisters = vain, selfish

Their jealousy further reinforces gendered stereotypes:

"Their sisters were secretly delighted at the prospect of getting rid of her…"

This portrays female rivalry as inherent, a common discursive pattern in fairy tales.

6. Marriage as the Ultimate Feminine Goal

Marriage is constructed as the resolution of the narrative and the fulfilment of feminine identity. *"Beauty, will you be my wife?" "Live to be my husband!"* The repetition of marriage proposals frames romantic union as the central narrative goal. Beauty's transformation in perspective is also significant. *"I would be happier with the monster… It is not wit or a fine face… but virtue…"* This reflects a discursive shift from fear to acceptance, reinforcing the idea that a woman's role is to recognise and reward male virtue through marriage.

7. Emotional Labour and Gender Expectations

Beauty performs emotional labour by comforting and validating the Beast: *"I will always value you as a friend…" "I love spending time with him…*" Her role becomes one of emotional caretaker, reinforcing a discourse where women are responsible for male emotional well-being. The Beast's transformation depends entirely on her: "He could not recover… until a maiden… declare that she loved him." This reinforces a gendered narrative where female love redeems male identity, placing responsibility for transformation on the woman.

4.6 Rapunzel

1. Female Confinement and Control through Discourse

The narrative strongly constructs femininity through confinement, restriction, and surveillance, primarily imposed by the witch. *"You will stay in this tower – forever!"* This declarative sentence reflects absolute authority and control, where another figure dictates Rapunzel's life. The stylistic use of short, forceful commands reinforces a discourse of female immobility and dependence.

"The world is a very bad place… You must never leave the tower."

This repeated warning constructs a discursive ideology of fear, where the outside world is framed as dangerous, particularly for women. The repetition normalises female isolation as protection, a common patriarchal narrative.

2. Construction of Passive Femininity

Rapunzel is initially portrayed as naïve, passive, and obedient, shaped by her isolation. "I do not know you," said Rapunzel. "I have no choice but to stay here… my whole life long." The phrase *"no choice"* highlights lack of agency, reinforcing a discourse where women are positioned as subjects of control rather than decision-makers. Her early dependence is also evident in her reliance on others for knowledge. "*There is nothing here for me to do!"* This reflects a restricted identity, where her existence is limited to the domestic and confined space of the tower.

3. Symbolism of Hair as Gendered Power and Objectification

Rapunzel's hair functions as a central stylistic and symbolic element, representing both power and objectification. *"Rapunzel, Rapunzel! Let down your hair!"* The repetition of this phrase establishes a ritualistic discourse, where her body becomes a tool for others. Her hair is not entirely her own; both the witch and the prince use it.

This creates a dual meaning:

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL

- **Power**: her hair enables connection to the outside world
- **Control**: her body is instrumentalized by others

The cutting of her hair signifies loss of agency:
"Snip, snap, and Rapunzel's lovely braid was cut off!"
The abrupt, onomatopoeic phrasing emphasises violence and control, symbolising the removal of her only means of interaction and autonomy.

4. Emergence of Female Agency

Despite initial passivity, Rapunzel gradually develops resistance and agency, reflected through dialogue and initiative. *"I must get out of this tower as soon as I can! But how?"* This marks a discursive shift from passive acceptance to active questioning.
Her plan demonstrates intellectual agency:
"Bring me a ball of silk… I will weave the silk into a ladder."
Here, the narrative uses problem-solving language, positioning Rapunzel as resourceful and strategic, challenging earlier portrayals of passivity.

5. Masculinity as Rescue and Mobility

The Prince represents freedom, mobility, and external knowledge, contrasting with Rapunzel's confinement.
"The world is not as bad as all that."
This statement positions the male figure as a bearer of truth and experience, reinforcing a discourse where men have access to the broader world.
His ability to move freely highlights gender asymmetry:
"I can come and go by holding onto your braid."
While Rapunzel is trapped, the Prince's mobility reinforces male independence and female dependence.

6. Romantic Discourse and Marriage Ideology

Marriage is introduced as a normative goal, though the narrative allows some hesitation from Rapunzel. *"Do you think you might want to get married someday?"* Unlike traditional fairy tales, Rapunzel does not immediately accept:
"Maybe… there is so much I have to learn…"
This response introduces a slight resistance to immediate romantic fulfilment, suggesting a more developed female consciousness.
However, the narrative ultimately reinforces conventional closure:
"They decided to be married… and lived happily ever after."
Thus, despite moments of agency, the discourse returns to traditional heteronormative resolution.

7. Female Curiosity vs Social Restriction

Rapunzel's curiosity is framed as both natural and dangerous, reflecting gendered expectations.
"What else is there that I am missing?"
This question represents a desire for knowledge and experience, often discouraged in female characters.
The witch's reaction reinforces restriction:
"Don't listen to anything you see or hear out there."
This creates a discursive opposition:

- Curiosity = independence
- Obedience = safety

8. Punishment and Suffering as Gendered Experience

Rapunzel is punished for asserting independence:
"*Rapunzel was cast off to a faraway desert."*

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

Exile functions as a narrative punishment, reinforcing the idea that female disobedience leads to suffering.

Similarly, the Prince's blindness introduces shared suffering:

"The Prince was blinded!"

However, his suffering leads to eventual reunion, while Rapunzel's suffering emphasises endurance and emotional strength.

9. Emotional Expression and Feminine Healing Power

Rapunzel's tears symbolise emotional depth and restorative power:

"Two tears of joy… fell into the eyes of the Prince. All at once, he could see again!"

This constructs a discourse where female emotion has transformative power, reinforcing a traditional trope:

- Women = emotional healers
- Men = recipients of that healing

5. Findings

The analysis of *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty* (contemporary version), *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Rapunzel* reveals consistent stylistic and discursive patterns in the construction of gender, with some variation in the modern retelling. Across the traditional tales, femininity is predominantly constructed through lexical choices that emphasise passivity, beauty, obedience, and emotional sensitivity. Characters such as Cinderella and Snow White are repeatedly described using adjectives like "poor," "fairest," and "sweet," reinforcing a semantic field of vulnerability and moral purity. Similarly, syntactic patterns such as repetition ("It was she who had to…") foreground women's association with domestic labour and caregiving roles. These findings align with earlier studies that argue fairy tales reproduce gendered linguistic patterns that naturalise female subordination (Tatar, 1992; Zipes, 2006).

In contrast, masculinity is consistently constructed through action-oriented verbs and narrative agency. Male characters such as princes and hunters are depicted as decision-makers and problem-solvers ("he rushed," "he went," "he saved"), reinforcing their dominance in narrative progression. This reflects what Norman Fairclough describes as the relationship between language and power, where discourse assigns authority to certain social groups (Fairclough, 1995). Even when male characters display emotional depth, as in *Beauty and the Beast*, their transformation still depends on female emotional labour, further reinforcing gendered expectations (Warner, 1995).

A key finding across the tales is the binary construction of femininity. Female characters are divided into "good" (passive, kind, beautiful) and "bad" (assertive, ambitious, powerful), as seen in Cinderella's stepsisters and Snow White's Queen. Assertive female voices are linguistically marked through verbs such as "shouted" and "screamed," which carry negative connotations, suggesting that female authority is undesirable. This supports the argument that fairy tales reinforce patriarchal ideology through oppositional gender representations (Bacchilega, 1997; Bottigheimer, 1987).

Another significant pattern is the restriction of female agency through transitivity structures. Female protagonists are often positioned as recipients of actions ("she was taken," "she was ordered"), while male characters function as agents. This reflects Halliday's functional grammar framework, where grammatical roles mirror social power relations (Halliday, 1994). Even when female characters act, their agency is confined to domestic or emotional domains, reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Symbolism further strengthens gender ideology. Objects such as the glass slipper (*Cinderella*), mirror (*Snow White*), spinning wheel (*Sleeping Beauty*), and hair (*Rapunzel*) function as

ISSN E: 2709-8273
ISSN P:2709-8265
JOURNAL OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND TESOL
JALT

discursive tools that regulate female identity. These symbols often link femininity to beauty, confinement, or passivity, supporting the idea that cultural narratives shape gender expectations (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979). Similarly, spaces such as the forest (*Little Red Riding Hood*) and the tower (*Rapunzel*) symbolise danger and restriction, particularly for female mobility.

However, the contemporary version of *Sleeping Beauty* introduces a shift in discourse. Aurora demonstrates agency, resistance, and autonomy through assertive language ("This is all wrong!"), challenging traditional norms. The narrative rejects compulsory marriage and presents gender roles as flexible and negotiable. This aligns with modern feminist reinterpretations of fairy tales that seek to subvert patriarchal structures (Bacchilega, 1997; Zipes, 2012). Despite this shift, the majority of the analysed tales continue to reinforce traditional gender ideologies, particularly through their narrative closures, where marriage is presented as the ultimate goal for female characters.

Table 5.1

Fairy Tale	Female Representation	Male Representation	Agency Level (Female)	Key Ideology
Cinderella	Passive, obedient, domestic	Active, decisive prince	Low	**Beauty and marriage as a reward**
Snow White	Innocent, fragile, domestic	Rescuer, authority figures	Very Low	**Female passivity and male rescue**
Sleeping Beauty (Modern)	Assertive, resistant, independent	Cooperative, less dominant	High	**Gender equality and choice**
Little Red Riding Hood	Naïve, obedient, vulnerable	Predator vs protector	Low	**Obedience ensures safety**
Beauty and the Beast	Self-sacrificing, nurturing	Dominant yet transformable	Medium	**Female emotional labour redeems the male**
Rapunzel	Confined but developing agency	Mobile, knowledgeable	Medium (developing)	**Restriction vs emerging independence**

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the stylistic and discursive analysis of the six fairy tales demonstrates that traditional narratives systematically construct gender roles through language, characterisation, and symbolism. Femininity is predominantly associated with passivity, beauty, obedience, and emotional labour, while masculinity is linked to action, authority, and narrative control. These patterns are reinforced through lexical choices, transitivity structures, and symbolic elements that collectively normalise patriarchal ideology. Although the contemporary reimagining of *Sleeping Beauty* introduces resistance and agency, it remains an exception rather than the norm. Overall, fairy tales function as powerful cultural texts that shape and perpetuate gender expectations, influencing readers' perceptions of identity, behaviour, and social roles.

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