

**“Clever girls are never much appreciated” –
a pseudo-feminist attempt to (re)define
the role of women in fairy tales retellings:
“The Surface Breaks” by Louise O’Neill
and “Beasts and Beauty: Dangerous Tales”
by Soman Chainani**

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to discuss the changes authors introduce in contemporary retellings of fairy tales. The main focus is on (re)defining the role of women. Attention is drawn to the pseudo-feminist message of the novels. It is indicated that pseudo-feminism appears to adopt feminist ideas and attitudes, but in reality it does not contribute to promoting true gender equality and instead becomes a marketing tool. Such a strategy is based on the insincere or superficial use of feminism in order to gain popularity and profit without real commitment to improving the situation of women. The following works are analysed: *The Surface Breaks* by Louise O’Neill and *Beasts and Beauty: Dangerous Tales* by Soman Chainani.

Key words: pseudo-feminism, retelling, fairy tale, *The Little Mermaid*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Beauty and the Beast*

**„Inteligentne dziewczynki nigdy nie są zbyt popularne” –
pseudofeministyczna próba (re)definicji roli kobiety w retellingach baśni**

Abstrakt: Celem artykułu jest omówienie zmian, jakie autorzy i autorki wprowadzają we współczesnych retellingach baśni. Uwagę poświęcono przede wszystkim (re)definicji roli kobiet i pseudofeministycznej wymowie analizowanych powieści. Wskazano, że pseudofeminizm pozornie przejmuje idee i postawy feministyczne, jednak w rzeczywistości nie przyczynia się do promowania prawdziwej równości płci, a feminizm staje się zamiast tego narzędziem marketingowym. Obiektem refleksji są: powieść *Pod taflą* Louise O’Neill i zbiór opowiadań *Piękno i bestie. Niebezpieczne baśnie* Somana Chainaniego.

Słowa kluczowe: pseudofeminizm, retelling, baśń, *Mala Syrenka*, *Czerwony Kapturek*, *Piękno i bestie*

Introductory considerations

According to researchers, “it is not necessary to convince someone about the growing vogue for fairy tales in the 21st century. It is visible in various areas of culture, it was announced in journalistic statements, speeches and scientific studies”¹. Angela Teresa Kalloli and Sarika Tyagi hold a similar opinion, stating that: “The number of contemporary fairy tale retellings, with the amalgamation of a feminist bent [...], has increased dramatically in recent years, especially in the realm of young adult literature”². Roksana Pilawska concludes:

“fairy tale motifs are undoubtedly one of the most popular sources of inspiration for creators of novels, films and television series. Some authors even claim that in today’s rational reality dominated by science, fairy tales have been perversely ‘in vogue’ for a long time”³.

The popularity of fairy tales – as material for postmodern reinterpretation – probably lies in treating them as “symbolic stories about contemporary reality and the complex human personality”⁴. It is believed that fairy tales teach of “timeless, universal values”⁵. Irena Słońska points out that “nowhere else is the problem of good and evil presented so clearly”⁶, and the juxtaposition of traits “provides children with models of moral behaviour”⁷. Moreover, they are important means of socialization since they include elements of a ritual initiation into adulthood⁸. According to Anna Tychmanowicz:

Children’s perception of fairy tales and identification with the hero are made easier by the traits of fairy tale characters – they are expressive, but usually do not have a precisely defined age; their names are quite ordinary (e.g. Hansel and Gretel), and even more often they are replaced by nicknames derived from external features (e.g. Tom Thumb, Little Red Riding Hood) or professions (e.g. miller, prince, tailor)⁹.

¹ W. Kostecka, *Metamorfozy baśni i baśniowe metamorfozy*, “Dzieciństwo. Literatura i Kultura” 2020, no 2, p. 195. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

² A.T. Kalloli, S. Tyagi, *Posthuman and pandemic elements in the feminist retellings of fairy tales in Marissa Meyer’s “Lunar Chronicles”*, “Research Result. Theoretical and Applied Linguistics” 2022, no 8, p. 124.

³ R. Pilawska, *Magiczne odbicia rzeczywistości, czyli o znaczeniu baśni w edukacji dziecka*, “Pedagogika Przedszkolna i Wczesnoszkolna” 2017, no 5, p. 70.

⁴ *Eadem*, *Baśnie jako przestrzeń socjalizacji – na przykładzie baśniowego wizerunku matki*, “Kultura i Wychowanie” 2019, no 1, p. 188.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 189. See also: E. Konieczna, *Baśń w literaturze i filmie. Rola baśni filmowej w edukacji filmowej dzieci w wieku wczesnoszkolnym*, Kraków 2005, p. 40.

⁶ I. Słońska, *Dzieci i książki*, Warszawa 1959, p. 138.

⁷ M. Tyszkowa, *Baśń i jej recepcja przez dzieci* [in:] *Baśń i dziecko*, introduction and ed. H. Skrobiszewska, Warszawa 1978, p. 150.

⁸ See also: S. Jaskulska, *Współczesne rytuały przejścia z dzieciństwa do dorosłości: baśń o Śpiącej Królewnie* [in:] *Bajka, baśń, legenda i mit w naukowych opracowaniach*, ed. A. Grabowski, M. Zaorska, Olsztyn 2016, p. 46.

⁹ A. Tychmanowicz, *Dawno, dawno temu... O roli baśni w wychowaniu i edukacji*, “Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska Lublin – Polonia. Sectio J” 2018, no 3, p. 103.

Nowadays, researchers question the thesis about the universality of traditional folk stories. Kostecka claims that:

the fairy tale clearly demonstrates the dependence of meaning on the context. Representatives of the historical-sociological school of research on fairy tales have repeatedly drawn attention to this, questioning the theses about the timeless, universal messages of fairy tales proclaimed by researchers – especially those associated with the psychoanalytic approach – who ignore the cultural, social and historical contexts of creating and reproducing this type of stories¹⁰. Broadly speaking, a fairy tale reflects the realities of a given place and time and the ideas existing in the community in which it was created and in which it is told (social, ideological issues, moral values, religious beliefs, and so on)¹¹.

It is also a cultural “archive in which relics of the historical past, past life and the consciousness that interpreted them have survived”¹². Moreover, as Maria Tatar emphasizes, “as we tell these stories, we simultaneously evoke the cultural experience of the past and reproduce it in a way that will shape and structure the experience of the children”¹³. In turn, Kamila Malinowska aptly claims that “Bettelheim’s approach completely ignores the contextual involvement of the fairy tale and the dependence of its reception on gender, nationality or age. According to critics, it cannot be assumed that the same processes occur in the psyche of every child”¹⁴. Grażyna Lasoń-Kochańska agrees with the statement, questioning the unisexuality of fairy tales and pointing out that they put forward completely different gender models for boys and girls¹⁵. Mary Daly, in her 1978 publication *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* “showed the classic fairy tale as a carrier of toxic patriarchal myths that convey a false image of reality and the human condition, as they store and transmit the camouflaged experience of the patriarchal lie about women and men”¹⁶. Daly suggested that “the child who is fed

¹⁰ Polemics with psychoanalytic interpretations of fairy tales were led by, among others, Jack Zipes in the publication *On the Use and Abuse of Folk and Fairy Tales with Children*. Bruno Bettelheim’s *Moralistic Magic Wand* [in:] *idem, Breaking the Magic Spell. Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, Lexington 2002.

¹¹ W. Kostecka, *Baśniowe herstory. Postmodernistyczne strategie reinterpretacyjne Angeli Carter, Tanith Lee i Emmy Donoghue*, “Creatio Fantastica” 2016, no 2, p. 24.

¹² D. Ulicka, *Wstęp* [in:] W. Propp, *Nie tylko bajka*, transl. D. Ulicka, Warszawa 2010, p. 19.

¹³ M. Tatar, *Off with Their Heads! Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood*, Princeton 1992, pp. 229–230.

¹⁴ K. Malinowska, *Wzorce socjalizacyjne dziewcząt w baśniach braci Grimm i Andersena oraz ich filmowych adaptacjach wytwórni Walta Disneya* [in:] *Queer i gender w nowych tekstach kultury dla dzieci i młodzieży, Queer i gender w nowych tekstach kultury dla dzieci i młodzieży*, ed. M. Bednarek, A. Kocznur, Poznań 2022, p. 128.

¹⁵ G. Lasoń-Kochańska, *Gender w literaturze dla dzieci i młodzieży. Wzorce płciowe i kobiecej repertuaru tematyczny*, Słupsk 2012, p. 45. On gender patterns in fairy tales see also: D. Budidarma, I. Sumarsono, F.I. Nur Abida, A.M.S Moybeka, *Gender Representation in Classic Fairy Tales: A Comparative Study of “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, “Cinderella” and “Beauty and the Beast”*, “World Journal of English Language” 2023, no 6.

¹⁶ K. Szymborska, *Postmodernistyczne metamorfozy baśni w Polsce*, “Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne” 2018, no 1, p. 247.

tales such as *Snow White* is not told that the tale itself is a poisonous apple, and the Wicked Queen (her mother/teacher), having herself been drugged by the same deadly diet throughout her lifetime, is unaware of her venomous part in the patriarchal plot¹⁷.

The belief that “the attractiveness of fairy tales in the eyes of children lies in the fact that they unerringly meet the basic spiritual needs of a personality developing in a specific culture”¹⁸ is being deconstructed, especially due to the fact that fairy tales promote different patterns of behaviour for both sexes, which is perceived in contemporary culture not only as unnecessary, but even harmful. Magdalena Bednarek – recalling Peggy Orenstein’s 2011 publication: *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, referring to the dangers resulting from thoughtless adaptation of fairy tale patterns – aptly points out that currently:

The real predators [...] are the heroines of traditional folk plots transposed into popular culture: fairy tale beauties and princesses embodying the phenomenon of hyper-girliness, i.e. girlie-girl culture – a phenomenon that has been observable since the 1980s, which, thanks to the media and late capitalist free market mechanisms, has a very strong impact on the behaviour and choices of teenagers growing up at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. Cinderella as the protagonist of one of the most popular fairy tales is a synecdoche of this culture whose main category is beauty¹⁹.

According to Orenstein, “princess culture has absorbed elements of the almost parallel girl power movement and treats the ideal of physical perfection as the choice of a self-aware woman”²⁰. Roksana Pilawska adds that “for centuries, fanciful stories about beautiful and virtuous princesses whispered into ears have created or rather perpetuated an imaginary pattern of female beauty and behaviour in the minds of girls”²¹.

Nowadays, fairy tale motifs are one of the most frequently used narrative patterns – often in a revisited, non-literal way. Plot solutions known, among others, from *Beauty and the Beast* (so-called enemies-to-lovers) or *Cinderella* (the relationship of an unremarkable heroine with an amazing or well-to-do man) are the basis of love plots in many fantasy novels and romances.

¹⁷ M. Daly, *Gyn/ecology. The metaethics of radical feminism* (e-version), Boston 1978, p. 34. See also: D. Haase, *Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship* [in:] *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches*, ed. idem, Detroit 2004.

¹⁸ P. Kowolik, *Wpływ bajki i baśni na dzieci w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej: szkic teoretyczny*, “Nauczyciel i Szkoła” 2004, no 3–4, p. 41.

¹⁹ M. Bednarek, *Kopciuszki dla młodzieży. O reworkingach motywu ATU 510A w literaturze young adult*, “Dzieciństwo. Literatura i Kultura” 2021, no 3, pp. 12–13.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 13. See also: P. Orenstein, *Cinderella ate my daughter: Dispatches from the front lines of the new girlie-girl culture*, New York 2011, p. 12.

²¹ R. Pilawska, *Od Kopciuszka do żony ze Stepford. O archetypowym i disnejowskim wzorcu baśniowej kobiecości*, “Terazniejszość – Człowiek – Edukacja” 2018, no 3, p. 38. See also: A. Baluch, *Archetypy literatury dziecięcej*, Wrocław 1993, p. 37.

The creators of contemporary retellings aim at providing new patterns²², redefining, mainly, gender roles²³ and the canon of beauty, although not always successfully. They set fairy tale stories in a new cultural context²⁴, move the plot to modern times or science fiction²⁵, de-taboo diseases²⁶ and disabilities²⁷, and Gothicise²⁸, horrorise²⁹ and eroticise³⁰ the plots.

²² Some authors desexualize and deromanticize fairy tales. An example is a collection *Asexual Fairy Tales* by Elizabeth Hopkinson.

²³ Katherine Arden took up polemics with traditional gender roles in the series *The Winter-night Trilogy* – a retelling of the fairy tale of Wise Vasilisa and the story of Grandfather Frost, set in the realities of medieval Russia. The protagonist opposes the conventions of the time and goes beyond traditional gender roles, although she is often forced to pretend to be a man.

²⁴ This is what Naomi Novik decided to do in her novels *Uprooted* and *Spinning Silver*. The first is a combination of *Beauty and the Beast* with the legend of the Wawel Dragon (a character from well-known Polish legend; a beast living in a cave under the Wawel Castle in Cracow, Poland, terrorizing the city's inhabitants) and takes place in a land stylized as Poland and Russia (Polnya and Rosya). The second is a retelling of Rumpelstiltskin in a state modeled on Lithuania (Lithvas) in the Jewish community. In a similar way, Sarah Porter modified the plot of the Russian fairy tale of Wise Vasilisa in her novel *Vassa in the Night*, the action of which was moved to Brooklyn, New York.

²⁵ The most popular sci-fi fairy tale retelling is *The Lunar Chronicles* by Marissa Meyer.

See: J. Aliyev, R. Ghassan, *Cinderella Goes Cyborg: Post-human Re-Imagining of Fairy Tale in Marissa Meyer's "Cinder"*, "International Journal of Languages' Education and Teaching" 2020, no. 1; L.T. Parson, *Cinderella's Transformation. From Patriarchal to 21st Century Expressions of Femininity*, "Study & Scrutiny: Research On Young Adult Literature" 2021, no. 1.

The following novels take place in modern times: *Gekerella: A Fangirl Fairy Tale and Bookish and the Beast* by Ashley Poston, *The 99 Boyfriends of Micah Summers* by Adam Sass, *If the Shoe Fits* by Julie Murphy.

²⁶ E.g. *How to Be Eaten* by Maria Adelman, in which the heroines of popular fairy tales are shown as patients of a psychiatric clinic working through their traumas.

²⁷ This thread was taken up by Brigid Kemmerer in *The Cursebreaker Series*, which is a re-narrative of *Beauty and the Beast*, whose main character has problems with movement caused by cerebral palsy. See: L. Davis, *Intensely Original: Disrupting the Horizon of Expectations of "Beauty and the Beast" in "A Curse so Dark and Lonely"*, "Study & Scrutiny: Research On Young Adult Literature" 2021, no. 1.

²⁸ E.g. *House of Salt and Sorrows* by Erin A. Craig.

²⁹ The following people wrote about combining fairy-tale elements with horror: Weronika Kostecka and Maciej Skowera in *Dlaczego Śnieżka łaknie krwi? Popkulturowe wariacje wampiryczne na temat Grimmowskiej baśni*, "Porównania" 2023, no. 1; Pauline Greenhill and Steven Kohm in *"Hansel and Gretel" Films: Crimes, Harms, and Children*, "Dzieciństwo. Literatura i Kultura" 2020, no. 1.

³⁰ This includes, for example, a series of novels from The Black Rose Auction project (planned release date – 2024), which includes: *Stolen Vows* by Sav. R. Miller (*Rapunzel* retelling), *Irresistible Devil* by Jenny Nordbak (*Rumpelstiltskin* retelling), *Divine Intervention* by RM Virtuesa (*Goldilocks* retelling), *Shattered Innocence* by Sara Cate (*Cinderella* retelling), *Royal Heart* by Nana Malone (*Beauty and the Beast* retelling), *Wicked Pursuit* by Katee Robert (*Little Red Riding Hood* retelling).

Eroticization is sometimes also combined with pornography – this topic was discussed by Kamila Kowalczyk in *Sfilmuję ci bajeczkę... Pornograficzne adaptacje baśni na przykładzie "Czerwonego Kapturka"*, [in:] *Bękarty X muzy. Filmowe adaptacje materiałów nieliterackich*, ed. P. Dudziński, R. Dudziński, K. Kowalczyk, Wrocław 2015.

The aim of the article is to analyse the changes authors introduce in contemporary retellings of fairy tales. I will pay special attention to the redefinition of the woman role model, especially from the perspective of pseudo-feminism, which I understand as:

dehumanising men, aiming to create a women-dominated society. As equity and equality sit at the very core of feminism, there is no doubt that the actions of pseudo-feminism go against the principles of feminism. When making this distinction it is important to confirm whether the action/s in question is about creating an even playing field (feminism) or giving females the upper hand (pseudo-feminism)³¹.

Pseudo-feminism “removes men and those who do not identify as female from being proponents of feminism and spreads a message of endorsement for feminine power being used as a destructive force against non-females”³². I understand pseudofeminism as a branch of postfeminism – a discourse in which attention is paid to the influence of popular culture on feminist issues³³. The case studies are the novel *The Surface Breaks* by Louise O’Neill (2018) and the collection of short stories *Beasts and Beauty: Dangerous Tales* by Soman Chainani (2021).

The face of patriarchy in *The Surface Breaks*

As researchers point out, *The Little Mermaid*, which “is a metaphysical reflection on life after death”³⁴, is undergoing many transformations nowadays³⁵. I mention the metaphysical nature of the story for a reason – this thread will be important in the analysis of the novel *The Surface Breaks* by Louise O’Neill.

³¹ J. Jagernath, D.M. Nupen, *Pseudo-feminism vs feminism – Is pseudo-feminism shattering the work of feminists?*, “Proceedings of The Global Conference on Women’s Studies” 2023, no. 1, p. 62.

³² *Ibidem*. See also: D. Rani, *Difference between feminism and pseudo feminism*, <https://aishwaryasandeep.com/2021/07/28/difference-between-feminism-and-pseudo-feminism/>, [access: 19.09.2023]; A. Sharma, *Feminism and Pseudo Feminism – A Legal Perspective*, “International Journal of Science and Research” 2022, no. 11; J. Chaudhary, *Pseudo Feminism vs Feminism*, <https://thelawexpress.com/pseudo-feminism-vs-feminism#:~:text=Feminism%20wants%20a%20society%20where,women’s%20equality%20is%20a%20feminist>, [access: 19.09.2023].

³³ See: W. Kostecka, *Postfeminizm jako perspektywa rozważań nad kulturą popularną – propozycja metody badań literackiej fantastyki dla młodych dorosłych*, “Filoteknos” 2022, vol. 12.

³⁴ K. Malinowska, *Wzorce socjalizacyjne dziewcząt...*, p. 133. The article is an interesting study of Andersen’s fairy tale in contrast to the Disney adaptation. Maciej Skowera also wrote about thanatological motifs: “*Mała syrena nie czuła wcale śmierci*”. *O tanatologicznych aspektach baśni Hansa Christiana Andersena* [in:] *Śmierć w zwierciadle humanistyki*, ed. D. Gapska, Poznań 2013.

³⁵ J. Wawryk, *Od baśniowej księżniczki do młodej kobiety, czyli nie taka mała syrenka w “Świecie obok świata”* Liz Braswell, “Dzieciństwo. Literatura i Kultura” 2021, no. 2, p. 36.

The fictional universe of the story is one-dimensional and shallow: the female protagonist, a red-haired³⁶, fifteen-year-old mermaid, Gaia³⁷, is the youngest child of the Sea King – a misogynistic tyrant who treats not only his daughters, but all females as objects. The remaining males behave no differently – all the mermaids in this community have a subordinate position to mer-men. The beginning of the retelling does not include any significant modifications, apart from the change of place (the coast of Great Britain) and time (present-day) of the action. A curious mermaid comes to the surface, observes people and rescues a boy during a storm (it is worth noting – dark-skinned) from drowning and death at the hands of the Rusalkas – dead and misandrist drowned women.

The heroine's father has no name; therefore, he is not a specific individual, but a personification of patriarchy³⁸. He disciplines his daughters to remain silent³⁹, uses violence to subjugate them⁴⁰, and arranges their marriages with much older admirers. Women are reduced to obedient and – above all – beautiful wives, because “when my grandmother calls

³⁶ The author was probably inspired not only by Andersen's story, but also by the Disney film, although there are far fewer of these references and they do not affect the message of the piece. On the trivialization of the message of *The Little Mermaid* in the Disney adaptation, see e.g.: K. Malinowska, *Wzorce socjalizacyjne dziewcząt...*; J. Wawryk, *Rany ciała i duszy O Andersenowskiej "Małej syrence" i jej reinterpretacjach we współczesnych powieściach dla młodzieży*, “Rana. Literatura – Doświadczenie – Tożsamość” 2021, no. 2; A. Fornalczyk, *Piękna czy bestia, czyli o disneizacji popularnej literatury dziecięcej [in:] Mody w kulturze i literaturze popularnej*, ed. S. Buryła, L. Gąsowska, D. Ossowska, Kraków 2011.

³⁷ Gaia is the name given to her by her mother and is a direct reference to the Greek earth goddess. It is also a prophecy regarding her fate (the one who, like her mother, will come to land). The family calls her Muirgen, which is a manifestation of the creator's interest in her Irish heritage, because it is the baptismal name – meaning “born of the sea” – of the legendary mermaid Lí Ban, changed into a human after being caught by fishermen (see: *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland*, vol. I, ed. J. O'Donovan, Dublin 1856, pp. 200–202; J. MacKillop, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, Oxford 1998, p. 297; J. Koch, *Celtic Culture*, Santa Barbara 2006, p. 1608). The mermaid's mother is called Muireann (in Irish: “white sea”; Muireann [in:] *A Dictionary of First Names*, ed. P. Hanks, K. Hardcastle, F. Hodges, Oxford 2019, online version: <https://tinyurl.com/4wx fwd37>, [access: 5/12/2023]) and comes from the – *nomen omen* – White Sea, the grandmother Thalassa (in Greek mythology the first sea goddess; see: R.S.P. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, vol. II, Leiden 2009, p. 530), and the deceased uncle Manannán (this is the name of the Celtic sea god; see: C. Squire, *Celtic Myth and Legend*, New York 2021). Unfortunately, the author does not explore the symbolism of the names in more detail, treating them as incrustations.

³⁸ On the phallocentrism of Andersen's fairy tale, see e.g. E. Tseïlon, *The Little Mermaid: an icon of woman's condition in patriarchy, and the human condition of castration*, “The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis” 1995, no. 76.

³⁹ “I have never been allowed to talk much. My father doesn't care for curious girls [...]”; L. O'Neill, *The Surface Breaks...*, p. 8.

⁴⁰ “My father, raising his voice or his trident or his hand; blows raining down upon us, but we deserved it; we were too loud and too demanding. Too much. We would be better next time. Next time, he would find no reason to punish us. We would have to be perfect”; *ibidem*, p. 82.

me ‘special’, she means ‘beautiful’. That is the only way a woman can be special in the kingdom. And I am beautiful”⁴¹. Non-heteronormative people (e.g. Gaia’s sister), especially those from a royal family, experience exclusion⁴².

O’Neill raises the important issue of molestation of adolescents – the protagonist’s fiancé, a balding general, repeatedly touches her against her will⁴³ and blackmails her into telling the king about her trips to the surface and her interest in people. While the execution of this issue in the novel leaves much to be desired – more on that later – de-tabooing such threads is an important element in the discussion about sexual abuse of juveniles⁴⁴.

Gaia, driven by her infatuation with a human boy and fear of a non-consensual marriage, leaves her father’s kingdom in favor of the Shadowlands, which is the domain of the Rusalkas⁴⁵ and the Sea Witch Ceto⁴⁶. The Sea Witch is a mermaid endowed with dark power and – importantly – obese. In this way, the author not only promotes body positivity, but also undertakes a (pseudo?)feminist discourse on women’s physicality⁴⁷. Although

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 9. Of course, the canon of beauty does not apply to men: “The men do not need to be beautiful. I watch them as they dance. They are not weighed down by pearls; their movements are a fraction faster than the mermaids, their limbs loose. Free.”; *ibidem*, p. 33.

⁴² “I have heard of girls with unnatural urges, cured, of course, by bonding and by having children of their own. But never a princess. Never a daughter of the Sea King”; *ibidem*, p. 84.

Grażyna Lasoń-Kochańska wrote about bi/homosexual themes in *The Little Mermaid* in the article *Gender, Queer i dorastanie – baśnie Hansa Christiana Andersena*, “Świat Tekstów. Rocznik Słupski” 2011, no. 9. The researcher pointed out the non-heteronormativity of the main character. Although it is difficult to find such insinuations in Gaia’s portrayal in the retelling, they do appear in the case of one of her sisters.

⁴³ “He tightens his grip and claims my lips with his, his cold tongue invading my mouth like a greasy sea slug”; L. O’Neill, *The Surface Breaks...*, p. 61; ‘I wanted to keep an eye on you, little one, your mother’s blood is in you. I wanted to make sure that, along with her red hair and her—’ he stares at my breasts and I resist the urge to shudder ‘—form, you had not also inherited other, more displeasing traits’; *ibidem*, p. 60.

⁴⁴ There are also incestuous themes in the background: “If Muirgen were not my daughter, perhaps I would have chosen her for myself”; *ibidem*, p. 26.

⁴⁵ The mermaid’s journey to the Shadowlands can be interpreted as a journey deep into herself, into the subconscious, conditioning her later decisions. It is also a confrontation with what is socially condemned and disgusting. See: J. Kristeva, *Potęga obrzydzenia. Esej o wstręcie*, transl. M. Falski, Kraków 2007, p. 7. The Rusalkas and the Sea Witch represent what is unacceptable and rejected, especially in patriarchal culture.

⁴⁶ In Greek mythology, Ceto was a sea goddess, the daughter of Pontus and – interestingly – Gaia. See: P. Grimal, *Słownik mitologii greckiej i rzymskiej*, transl. J. Łanowski, Wrocław 2008, p. 183.

⁴⁷ “A tail so black that it dissolves into the gloomy sea so she looks like a floating torso. Skin pale, and so much of it – rolling into ruffs of flesh around her neck, spooling around her waist. I have never seen a woman of this size before. Every maid in court has been told that we must maintain a certain weight for the aesthetic preference of the Sea King and his mer-men”; L. O’Neill, *The Surface Breaks...*, p. 78. “She runs her hands down her own body, caressing it with a touch that is infinitesimally tender. ‘I am comfortable’. She sounds out

promoting self-acceptance is perceived as a positive social trend, in the novel it borders on kitsch because the issues discussed are presented in an exaggerated way.

Ceto, unlike the witch from Andersen's original, tries to persuade the mermaid to turn into a human. She draws attention to the superficiality of her feelings and the confusion between lust and love: "You desire two stumps of flesh to walk upon, stumps that can be spread open in a manner that no sea-tail will permit'. Her head drops as she whispers to the snake around her waist. 'All this to satisfy a human who isn't even aware of her existence'"⁴⁸. She also mocks the typical fairy tale ending: "And you will have a husband and a child and a kitchen to call your own. Isn't that what every little maid wants?"⁴⁹.

Gaia, in accordance with the original⁵⁰, decides to sacrifice herself – the witch cuts her tongue off and gives her a potion that will make her legs grow. In Andersen's version, the mermaid's experiences on land – including love for the prince, death and obtaining an immortal soul – have a transcendent dimension. The heroine had to go beyond the limits of understanding to achieve spiritual transformation. Similarly, in *The Surface Breaks*, experiences are primarily transcendental – necessary for her to discover the truth not only about herself, but also about the world around her. Moreover, unlike Andersen's original, it does not focus only on internal experiences, but explores her new physicality and the sensations associated with it:

I want to pull him down, nestle on his lap and curl into his body, I want to make us one [...]; A shiver of heat runs through me and I am torn between pulling away and reaching forward and grabbing his hand, moving it to where I need it to be, to this new place that I have just discovered [...]; His thigh nudging my legs apart, his fingers on my throat. That heat rising, I pull the dress up around my waist, my hand drifting to that new place, that part of me that I had not known would exist when I struck a bargain with the Sea Witch for human legs. I am made wild with longing, my fingers dipping inside the wet heart, imagining Oliver's body on top of mine. Something akin to bliss, or maybe agony, teetering on the knife edge in between shivers from my very centre to my toes, an overwhelming relief knocking me drowsy⁵¹.

As in the original, the mermaid does not meet true love, but learns a number of bitter truths about the world. Men on land turn out to be as

each syllable clearly. 'Do you know what it feels like to be comfortable in your skin? Have you ever known?"; *ibidem*, p. 80. "[...] Being called fat is not an insult, little mermaid. It is as meaningless as being called thin. They are just descriptions. It is your father who has deemed it to be a negative word, and a negative state of being"; *ibidem*, pp. 82–83.

Ceto also reproduces the stereotype of a sexually liberated, misandrist feminist who easily decides to have an abortion: "We were told that she was jealous of the Sea King's powers, bitter because she was no match for his might. We were told that she did not want to bear children and if she laid eggs, she would eat them before they hatched"; *ibidem*, pp. 78–79.

⁴⁸ L. O'Neill, *The Surface Breaks...*, pp. 84–85.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

⁵⁰ H.C. Andersen, *Complete Fairy Tales*, transl. J. Hersholt, San Diego 2014, pp. 49–50.

⁵¹ L. O'Neill, *The Surface Breaks...*, p. 96; 100; 119.

selfish and brutal as the mer-men society – they molest women subordinate to them in the hierarchy⁵² and disregard them – including their own mothers⁵³ – and practice slutshaming⁵⁴. Her physical suffering is not compensated. There is not a single positive male character in *The Surface Breaks*, and their aggression is implied by their fear of the opposite sex: “Some men are very afraid of women, my child. And those men long for us the most, and are the most dangerous when they do not get what they want”⁵⁵. They are also the cause for conflict between women⁵⁶.

The ending of the novel applies interesting solutions – bitter and disappointed, Gaia goes to the bedroom of her former lover – in the original⁵⁷ it took place after the man’s wedding, here after his birthday, when he disappeared with a woman he had just met – to end his life and thus return to the form of a mermaid. His companion turns out to be Ceto in the form of a young girl. She reveals to the heroine the truth about the death of her mother and uncle – both murdered by the Sea King – their family connections (she is Gaia’s aunt, her father’s sister) and the powers the mermaids had before the patriarchal society took them away:

“All mermaids used to have powers, Muirgen”. Ceto hands me a towel to wrap around my feet. I hadn’t even noticed the wounds had re-opened, spilling their guts on to the floor. I look at them in disgust. What I would give to have my tail back. “The powers would develop the day we came of age, when our bodies decided that we were women now. But we were told such powers weren’t mermaid-like. We were told that no mer-man would want to be

⁵² “I can see the tip of his tongue darting into Ling’s ear, her barely perceptible shudder. I should go over there and help, like I wish someone had intervened when Zale put his hands on me. But is it my place to do so? But maybe this type of behaviour is simply what women must withstand in order to exist in the world? We are trained to be pleasing, and to crave male attention, to see their gaze as a confirmation of our very worthiness. Are we allowed to complain, then, if the attention is not of the type we like?”; *ibidem*, p. 117. “A hand reaching down, pulling up my skirt, Rupert’s fingers prodding that new place between my legs. No. No. But I cannot speak and worse, I cannot move. I am motionless, petrified; watching this man as he takes my body and does what he wants with it”; *ibidem*, p. 174.

⁵³ “You can’t control all the men in this family, Mother”; *ibidem*, p. 122. “how can Eleanor Carlisle be trusted to run an entire company if she can’t get her own son to attend a dinner party?”; *ibidem*, p. 127–128. “I don’t like this version of Oliver that she is describing. Someone who is selfish, weak. A man who is prepared to abuse his mother while still using her for all that she’s worth”; *ibidem*, p. 145. The heroes also practice so-called *mansplaining* (“And that, my dear lady, an older gentleman in a bow tie says to Eleanor, waving his fork at her, ‘is why The Carlisle Shipping Company has been such a success’ ‘Yes, I am aware of that,’ she replies, unsmiling. ‘I am the CEO, after all’”; *ibidem*, p. 133).

⁵⁴ This is the practice of criticizing the way of dressing or behaving, especially against women, by labeling them as promiscuous. “‘What a slut,’ I hear someone say. ‘And what is she wearing?’”; *ibidem*, p. 164.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

⁵⁶ “‘Zale was mine,’ she said. ‘Everything was perfect before. Perhaps if you hadn’t been born then our mother wouldn’t have lost her mind and deserted us.’ I drew back as if she had slapped me, but she didn’t stop there. ‘And you don’t even appreciate Zale. You’re so ungrateful that you fall in love with the first human man you set your eyes on’”; *ibidem*, p. 74.

⁵⁷ H.C., Andersen, *Complete Fairy Tales...*, p. 54.

bonded with us if we were more powerful than they were. They warned us that our powers made us too loud. Too shrill. And so women became quiet because we were promised that we would be happier that way”⁵⁸.

She also once again expresses her disgraceful opinion about men⁵⁹ and suggests to her niece that she commit suicide by stabbing herself and throwing herself into the depths of the sea to turn into a Rusalka:

You will be safe with us [...]. Join us, I implore you. Join the true sisterhood in your mother’s name. You can help us achieve peace, once and for all, by ridding the kingdom of your father and his army of rapacious mer-men. We can show the women how to reclaim their powers. They’re still there, in every one of them, just buried so deep that they think they are lost for ever. But we can teach them. That can be your legacy, Gaia⁶⁰.

However, the mermaid’s thoughts are interrupted by the appearance of her father who, taking her sisters hostage, blackmails his daughter. The girl – almost instantly – having learned new, hidden powers, murders the Sea King and then, according to Ceto’s suggestion, seals her fate. As a Rusalka:

I will be a warrior, I decide, driving the knife through the air and aiming true at my heart, the searing pain muffling my sisters’ cries. (I love you, sisters. I love you all.) I will grow my nails to claws and shave my teeth to blades. I will flay the skin from the bones of men like my father. I will tear them apart and I will eat them raw. Oh, I will set them on fire and devour their ashes whole. I will be Rusalka. I will have my vengeance⁶¹.

Drowned females are a metaphor for scorned and wronged women – who were indirectly forced by men to take their own lives:

The Rusalkas rose to the surface to sing the sailors to a watery grave, stuffing death into their bloated lungs. They sing so sweetly, the Salkas do. They sing for revenge for all that has been inflicted upon them [...]; You would trade a girl’s life so easily, would you, little one? For some man you don’t even know? And besides, what use would I have with a girl? [...] It is not women that must atone for their sins; [...] Calling the names of men who were long dead, men who broke their hearts or their bodies, and sometimes both⁶².

⁵⁸ L. O’Neill, *The Surface Breaks...*, p. 191.

⁵⁹ When he first meets Gaia, she mentions that: “Men have always been told that slimness is the most important attribute a woman can possess; more important than intelligence or wit or ambition, apparently. Although nowhere near as useful, if you ask me”, *ibidem*, p. 88. Interestingly, in the first adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* from Disney (dir. J. Musker, R. Clements, 1989), the following fragment appears in the song of the sea witch Ursula: “You’ll have your looks, your pretty face. And don’t underestimate the importance of body language, ha! The men up there don’t like a lot of blabber. They think a girl who gossips is a bore! Yet on land it’s much preferred for ladies not to say a word. And after all dear, what is idle babble for? Come on, they’re not all that impressed with conversation. True gentlemen avoid it when they can. But they dote and swoon and fawn. On a lady who’s withdrawn. It’s she who holds her tongue who gets a man”. In the 2023 remake (dir. R. Marshall) this was cut out because it was considered to objectify a woman and reduce the purpose of her existence only to finding an attractive partner.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 195.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 204.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 8; 42; 73.

Although O’Neill undertakes an important discourse aimed at exposing the often difficult situation of women, the creation of a world in which every single man is a ruthless oppressor bears the hallmarks of misandry – visible in numerous aspects of the story.

Beautiful beasts? – apparent liberation, false sisterhood in *Beasts and Beauty*

Some pseudo-feminist narratives do not describe a direct fight against patriarchy, but propose a vision of reality in which heroines choose loneliness or live in women’s enclaves. This is how Soman Chainani reinterpreted *Beauty and the Beast* and *Little Red Riding Hood*. The first story does not introduce many changes to Leprince de Beaumont’s original, apart from a change in the cultural context (the family of Beauty, here called Mei, is probably of Chinese origin⁶³, although the action takes place in France, as evidenced by the reference to Toulouse). The main semantic shift is the protagonist’s motivation – in Chainani’s work, she does not sacrifice herself out of love for her father, but in search for seclusion and a peaceful life in the middle of nowhere:

But Mei isn’t doting on her father out of virtue. She finds him stubborn, arrogant, and obsessed with money. Yet playing the dutiful daughter has benefits. She can stay at home and read her books, while her sisters hunt for husbands. Men in this town are boorish and bigoted. They look at you instead of see you. Mei wants nothing to do with them, let alone tie herself to one for life⁶⁴.

She willingly agrees to become a “prisoner” of the Beast, who is a well-to-do heir of a huge castle, because “she can kill the Beast. No one would care, would they? The castle would be hers. It sounds like a nice place to grow old in”⁶⁵.

The Beast tries to infatuate the girl, but she is resistant to his advances, emphasizing that true love is not based only on physical interest, and strangers cannot build a deep and lasting relationship in a short time. According to the protagonist, a woman should be sure that her partner “understands her. That when she falls, he will catch her”⁶⁶. At the same time, she distances herself from the idea of a relationship, preferring to lead a solitary life: “What if I do not want to marry? [...] What if I don’t want to find love at all?”⁶⁷.

If the author had consistently followed the abovementioned beliefs, the reinterpretation of *Beauty and the Beast* would be an interesting transforma-

⁶³ Mei is a Chinese name meaning “beautiful”. Mei [in:] *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mei_\(given_name\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mei_(given_name)), [access: 2.12.2023].

⁶⁴ S. Chainani, *Beasts and Beauty: Dangerous Tales*, London 2021, p. 111.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 119.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

tion that questions traditional rules regarding the dependence of fulfillment and happiness on marriage and promoting the idea of “love at first sight”. Such a version of the fairy tale would instead promote patterns emphasizing that mature relationships consist of more components than the beauty of the chosen ones. Unfortunately, the ending of the story contradicts such postulates. Mei causes an “unfortunate” accident for the Beast, who falls from a height while trying to catch her. This gesture makes her love the man. The enchanted prince turns into a man, but the woman does not know this:

A thunder of horses. She runs to the front of the castle and throws the doors open. There is Lieu Wei in full armor, with six handsome men on horses, wielding bows and swords. He’s rich again, her father. It was only a matter of time. And now he’s come to bring her home. She slams the doors with vengeance, bolts them, seals herself inside. To the library she runs— But the Beast isn’t where she left him. Instead, there’s a gorgeous brown prince in a gilded suit, looking like he’s come to marry her. One of her father’s men! She doesn’t hesitate. She grabs the knife from her leg and stabs the stranger in the chest, a brutal blow, before holding him down, demanding to know what he’s done with her Beast⁶⁸.

Too late she discovers who the attacked prince is: “Only when she sees the sheen on the prince’s lips where she kissed them, the familiar fire in his eyes, wild with bestly love, does the breath leave his body and her heart dawn to the depths of her mistake. To look and not see. She is as guilty as the rest”⁶⁹.

Mei spends the rest of her life alone in the castle. However, readers are left unsatisfied. What mistake did Mei make? Are we talking about a (planned?) murder or giving up the love of a man who imprisoned her and whom she didn’t know well? The writer avoids addressing not only the previously mentioned postulates, but also the meaning of Leprince de Beaumont’s original, in which “the role of a woman is more important than the role of a man – mainly because the life of the Beast depends on Beauty, saving him or redeeming his past sins”⁷⁰. Are these attempts to modify fairy tales to redefine the role of a woman? Probably not.

Soman Chainani presented a slightly different vision of women’s liberation in *Little Red Riding Hood* – a story with many Freudian connotations. In Chainani’s version: “on the very first day of spring the wolves eat the prettiest girl”⁷¹. This special date⁷² can be interpreted as a symbolic finale

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 120–121.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 121.

⁷⁰ A. Mik, *Postmodernistyczne Bestie. Transformacje wizerunku baśniowego “potwora”* [in:] *Czytanie menażerii. Zwierzęta w literaturze dziecięcej, młodzieżowej i fantastycznej*, ed. A. Mik, M. Skowera, P. Pokora, Warszawa 2016, p. 117. The transformations of *Beauty and the Beast* were also the subject of the following study: C. Bensaada, *The Art of Retelling Fairy Tales: A Study of “Beauty and the Beast” Fairy Tale, Robin McKinley’s Beauty: A Retelling of the Story Beauty and the Beast (1978) and the 2017 Disney Adaptation*, Master’s thesis, Guelma 2020.

⁷¹ S. Chainani, *Beasts and Beauty...*, p. 8.

⁷² According to Magdalena Bednarek: “19th-century interpreters understood the story about the girl devoured by the wolf as a fictional representation of the sun or spring, which periodically disappear and emerge from the darkness to make people’s lives easier and

of puberty and the beginning of womanhood⁷³. The most beautiful one⁷⁴ was chosen by the wolves, and her place of residence was marked with claw marks and urine. She was therefore marked by males as their subordinate property – “But once a girl is chosen, she is theirs. Neither child nor family can appeal”⁷⁵.

The protagonist of the story is an unexpected victim since her beauty appeared unexpectedly. A feature that is desired by people becomes a curse because it condemns them to death. However, the girl does not intend to passively submit to her fate – she sets out to meet the wolves who “cannot help themselves. They are prisoners of their nature”⁷⁶, she deceives them (sends them in pursuit of a non-existent, more beautiful sister), and after reaching her grandmother’s house, they together murder the pack and establish a safe haven for all women socially rejected due to their beauty. Chainani, based on the meaning of the original fairy tale (sexual conflict⁷⁷, puberty, initiation into adulthood/sexuality, domination of the male over the female, etc.), overwrites it with a story about beauty and ugliness. He suggests that beauty, socially recognized as one of the higher values, is not only a “blessing”, but also a curse. This reinterpretation, as in the case of *Beauty and the Beast*, leaves a certain feeling of dissatisfaction, because the author does not give any hope for improving the fate of unattractive girls through whom boys “rake like leftovers. It’s why any girl who marries one cleans up after him without complaint. She’s lucky to be alive, they tell her in their grunts and growls. Lucky her beauty isn’t worthy of beasts.

bring hope”; M. Bednarek, *Babcine fatalaszki – wokół wzorców genderowych w re-narracjach “Czerwonego Kapturka”* [in:] *Queer i gender w nowych tekstach kultury dla dzieci i młodzieży...*, p. 104. The researcher refers to the following sources: G. Hüsing, *Is ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ a Myth?*, transl. P. Sieber [in:] *Little Red Riding Hood. A Casebook*, ed. A. Dundes, London 1989; P. Saintyves [Émile Nourry], *Little Red Riding Hood or The Little May Queen*, transl. C. Rousslin [in:] *Little Red Riding Hood. A Casebook*, ed. A. Dundes, London 1989.

⁷³ See: E. Fromm, *Zapomniany język. Wstęp do rozumienia snów, baśni i mitów*, transl. J. Marzęcki, introduction K.T. Toeplitz, Warszawa 1972, p. 96. Bettelheim, on the other hand, interpreted this fairy tale in accordance with Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis as a struggle with the principles of pleasure and reality and the threat associated with the Electra complex; B. Bettelheim, *Cudowne i pożyteczne. O znaczeniach i wartościach baśni*, transl. D. Danek, Warszawa 2010, pp. 24–42.

⁷⁴ A similar thread can be found in *Czerwona baśń* by Wiktoria Korzeniewska, a re-narrative of *Little Red Riding Hood* inspired by characters from Russian folklore (e.g. Koschei, Baba Yaga). In this version of the fairy tale, the role of the grandmother is played by the witch, Koschei the wolf, and each year the ugliest girl from the village becomes the Little Riding Hood.

⁷⁵ S. Chainani, *Beasts and Beauty...*, p. 8.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁷⁷ The characters in the original fairy tale written by Grimm and Perrault play roles corresponding to what is traditionally masculine and feminine, in addition to the connection between masculinity and nature, here representing activity versus feminine passivity.

Her mother was one of these, plucked from the scrap heap. The girl saw it in her father's face"⁷⁸.

The heroine and her grandmother hide the fact that they have killed the enemy symbolizing phallogentrism from the village community. They reaffirm patriarchy, allowing more girls to be sent to the forest, and impose on them a convenient pattern of matriarchal, but hermetic, reality. They do not advocate liberation from male rule and the treatment of young women as objects because of their physical attributes, but they see it as a chance to take power and continue the questionable tradition of paying tribute. Thus, the discussed renarrative also fits into the discourse of pseudo-feminism (although it can be interpreted differently, e.g. as irony), because – similarly to classical messages – it excludes people without beauty, and is also a testimony to the renewed enslavement of physically attractive women – this time not in a gynocentric, rather than androcentric, community.

Conclusions

In the texts discussed, one can notice an attempt at a post-feminist revision of contemporary cultural and social problems. Unfortunately, the creations of the worlds presented – as clearly negative places, inhabited by patriarchal societies in which women are dominated and suffer physical and mental violence – and the recipe for changing reality suggested by the authors – revolt, rebellion, fight and revenge – are simplified visions, trivializing the discussed issues and presenting them in a caricatural way. In *The Surface Breaks* men are shown as aggressive and insecure individuals, afraid of women, demonizing those who dare to oppose them (e.g. calling them witches).

Similar conclusions come to mind after reading and analyzing the stories from *Beasts and Beauty*. Although the author raises important issues, he processes them in a way that is insufficient to destabilize culturally established stereotypes, instead of polemicizing with them. The men in his texts are weak, they do not break away from the fairy-tale patterns of subordinate masculinity.

Thus, the fight for equal rights turns into a pseudo-feminist narrative that excludes men and adopts demands (analogous to patriarchal ones) that the creators, according to their declarations, want to fight for.

In their novels and stories, the writers implement all of the above postulates, only deepening the binary oppositions between the sexes. This is most visible in the performances of the main characters and the men surrounding them. The construction of the world presented in the works is therefore an unsuccessful attempt to start an equality dialogue that would show the oppression and injustice resulting from living in a masculinized society.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

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