

## A Feminist Study of *Tangled*

MUBEEN KHALID

Lahore College for Women University  
Lahore, Pakistan

### Abstract:

*Fairytales and its Disney adaptations have always been popular among the young audience. But they are not as simple as they look. The present study attempts to show how classical fairy tales and their Disney adaptations manifest gender inequality by featuring submissive heroines, masculine heroes, and evil witches. The study then suggests how feminine beauty ideal, sexism, marriage, and binary opposition are dominant themes in these adaptations. However, Tangled deviates from this criterion of gender inequality and disrupts the existence of sexism and binary oppositions by giving more independent roles to both the male and female characters. The study concludes with the opinion that while the previous Disney films are stereotypical, Tangled has enhanced its characterization by depicting ambitious heroine, dynamic hero, and the peculiar antagonist who has both positive and negative traits.*

**Key words:** Feminism, Sexism, Binary Opposition, Gender Stereotypes, Feminine Beauty Ideal

“Prince Charming, Prince Charming,” Rapunzel replied,  
“I have no intention of being your bride.  
We will not get married. We will not elope.  
I’ve cut off my hair and I’ve braided a rope. (Nesbitt 2009, 127)

With the immense popularity of fairytales and its Disney adaptations, many questions are arising about the

representation of gender roles and stereotypes that Disney films are inflicting in young children. A survey report in Telegraph, UK reveals that fairytales are too scary for modern children. Parents don't want to read the classical fairytales to their children because of the violence and gender inequality they reveal. All the Disney princesses such as Cinderella, Aurora, Snow White, Ariel, and Belle are stereotypical gender biased heroines that fortify the notions about the true place of a woman in the patriarchal society. Among these Disney films, *Tangled* (2010) is an adaptation of Grimm Brothers' fairytale *Rapunzel*, featuring the voices of Mandy Moore (Rapunzel), Zachary Levi (Flynn Rider), and Donna Murphy (Mother Gothel) in main roles.

The present study attempts to explore how *Tangled* diverges from the Grimm Brothers' *Rapunzel* and other Disney films that still maintain the patriarchal structure, and redefines the gender roles by giving more independence to its male and female characters. Though the main purpose is to explore the representation of gender in Grimm's *Rapunzel* and its Disney adaptation (*Tangled*), yet the study briefly examines how *Tangled* is a breakaway from the previous Disney princess stereotyped films.

*Tangled* (2010) is a feminist retelling of The Grimm Brothers' *Rapunzel*. The concept of Feminism is nothing new and a lot of critics have defined it differently. The textbook on Feminism by the Bristol Women's Studies Group (1979), for example defines Feminism as "both awareness of women's position in society as one of the disadvantage or inequality compared with that of men, and also a desire to remove those disadvantages" (5). Whereas the original fairytale was about Rapunzel's being a typical damsel in distress, who needs to be rescued by a hero, Disney, with its *Tangled* introduces somewhat an aspiring and independent Rapunzel. She is not willing to spend her whole life in a tower, neither is she interested in eloping with the prince charming, rather, she is

ambitious to see the floating lanterns and the life outside the tower.

Grimm's Rapunzel is a typical heroine of the fairytale and "The Maiden in the Tower" (Thompson 1977, 102). Like Cinderella and Snow White, she is not rebellious at all. She never tries to change her situation and submissively accepts evil witch's cruel and degrading treatment. The story just focuses on Rapunzel's physical appearance as the "most beautiful child under the sun", who has very long hair "fine as spun gold" and a "sweet voice" (Grimm 2004, 104). However, Rapunzel in *Tangled* is intellectual, brave, rebellious, and clever. She loves adventures and is very curious to see the world especially the floating lights. She asks Mother Gothel for permission, but she refuses. So unlike the Grimm's heroine, she uses her brain and makes a smart deal with Flynn Rider who accidentally comes in the tower after stealing the tiara from Royal Palace. She tells him that he can have his tiara back if only he takes her to see the lights. She even stands up to Mother Gothel when she realizes that she is the lost princess. She holds Mother Gothel's wrist and tells her that, "I'll never let you use my hair again" and at another time, "For every minute of the rest of my life I will fight" (Greno and Howard 2010). Moreover, it's her bravery and ambition that ultimately leads her towards her true identity and real parents.

The Grimm's *Rapunzel* and all the previous Disney films are anti-feminist since they all have two extreme categories of women; the good women and the bad women. This division is also linked to the binary oppositions. Critic Dani Cavallaro (2004) defines binary opposition as the "pairs of contrasting signs." Whereas the first term is considered as "positive concept", the second is "marginalized as negative." Feminist critics tell how these binary oppositions have been used throughout the history to "assert men's superiority over women." For example, Helen Cixous has given the example of binary oppositions of "activity/passivity" where the passivity is always associated with women (24). Likewise, in fairy tales men

are active, strong, intelligent, and dominant while women are passive, weak, naive, and submissive. Moreover, the binary opposition of good and evil also exists in these tales. The beautiful, young, innocent, submissive and passive women in *Rapunzel*, *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Red Riding Hood* are good. Strong and powerful women in the same tales are ugly, old, evil, and active. Wherever the power is being linked with women, it is depicted as destructive thus suggesting that only powerless women are good. For instance, the stepmothers in *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, and the witch in *Rapunzel*, are powerful women but they are portrayed in negative light. They are monstrous, evil and conspiring. Only those women are valued who are passive and submissive in their attitudes. *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Ariel*, and *Rapunzel* are perfect epitome of beauty, kindness, and goodness because they all are very domestic and submissive. They cook, sing, and accept the cruel attitudes of their stepmothers and evil witches. The domesticity of these heroines also signifies their stereotypical gender roles in a male dominating society. Whereas men are brave and adventurous, women are stereotypically depicted as dependent housewives, mothers or princesses in these fairy tales.

Moreover, many of these fairytales are sexist as they convey the message that women lack intellectual abilities so their role should be limited to the house wives only. In their sexist stereotypical powerless and submissive depiction, they are considered inferior to men and hence limited to the household activities only. They cannot rescue or save themselves because they are weak. So they need some macho men and princes to save them. Grimm's *Rapunzel* and Disney films are full of sexist attitudes. These tales are more about silencing the women in society and making them submissive. That's why these tales are dominated with the theme of marriage. Every heroine is in search of her prince charming whether it is *Cinderella*, *Ariel*, *Snow White*, or *Rapunzel*. Grimm's *Rapunzel* also suggests that women are the reason of the downfall of the

men. Rapunzel's biological mother forces her husband for bringing rampion from evil witch's garden which caused the abduction of the new born child. Similarly, the destruction of the prince is caused by a woman, Rapunzel. The prince is punished with blindness and fated to the wilderness only because the evil witch finds out Rapunzel's betrayal.

Besides, the idea of feminine beauty also makes these tales sexist. All the fairy tales are prevalent with the idea of feminine beauty even beauty is the most important feature that a fairy tale heroine must have. Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz (2010) define the feminine beauty ideal as the "socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women's most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain...." (185). They also indicate that this idea of feminine beauty is an "oppressive, patriarchal practice that objectifies, devalues, and subordinated women" (185), as the fairy tales suggest that women should be pretty enough to attract the men. Thus, it restricts their roles to mere beautiful objects that can neither think nor act wisely. For instance, In Grimm's Rapunzel, prince was attracted to *Rapunzel* because of her sweet voice and then she, like all other heroines, managed to impress the prince from her striking beauty.

However, these sexist attitudes, disempowerment of women, and gender stereotypes are disrupted in *Tangled*. Instead of getting married, the female protagonist wants to pursue her dreams. It is also important to note that she was not interested in Flynn Rider in the beginning and her main purpose was not to find a man of her dreams but to see the floating lights. That's why Flynn's good looks, his sense of humor, and his fighting talents could not impress Rapunzel. Even her relationship with Flynn Rider is not the centre of the plot rather, her quest for her true identity and her dreams are more emphasized in the film.

She loves reading, painting, baking, pottery, candle making and singing. Her passion for painting is obvious by the

paintings on the walls inside the tower unlike the Grimm Brothers' Rapunzel who just sings to pass the time. Besides, Rapunzel's hair in *Tangled* is not just the sign of her beauty but it also offers protection thus creating the difference from Grimm's *Rapunzel*, where it serves only one purpose and that is to climb up the tower. Kendra Magnusson (2012) demonstrates, "*Tangled* emphasizes that the protagonist is not Rapunzel herself but instead the story of her "tangled" hair. Because tangled hair serves as the film's most unique facet and remains the strongest signifier linking it to the tale...." (296). Rapunzel uses her hair as an instrument of self-defense and ties a stranger (Flynn Rider) up with her hair, when he intrudes into the tower in the start of the film. She uses it as a swing and a rope many times to help Flynn Rider and herself later on in the film. It is the hair that is finally used as a wire by Rapunzel's pet Pascal to throw the antagonist out of the tower. Though Rapunzel ends up with short hair in the film yet, it can be seen as a strong point as "women with shorter hair are often perceived as more masculine" (Manning 2010, 35).

Apart from her hair, she constantly uses frying pan as a weapon. When Flynn Rider climbs up into the tower for the first time, Rapunzel inquires him with her frying pan and knocks him unconscious with it. With this use of frying pan, she also makes a mocking gesture towards household chores of women and breaks the stereotype of domesticity. Whereas sword is usually considered as a masculine weapon, frying pan becomes a feminine weapon in the film. Even the frying pan replaces the importance of sword when Flynn Rider admits its values and knocks many guards with the frying pan, saying, "Oh mama, I've got to get me one of these" (Greno and Howard 2010). Furthermore, the new male army replaces the swords with frying pans at the end of the film.

Rapunzel in *Tangled* breaks the stereotype of typical gender roles and performs many heroic acts. Whereas Grimm's Rapunzel is helpless and waits for others, especially a prince to save her, *Tangled's* Rapunzel reverses the gender role and

saves the male protagonist all the time. She not only helps the male protagonist in escaping from Royal guards and heals his wound but also saves his life at the end of the film. When Mother Gothel stabs Flynn Rider, he dies. Rapunzel's tear that possesses the healing power falls on Flynn and resurrects him. Rapunzel not only saves Flynn's life but also makes him a prince by marrying him.

As far as the characterization of the antagonists is concerned, they are witches known as Dame Gothel in Grimm's *Rapunzel*, and Mother Gothel in *Tangled* respectively. Dame Gothel is very evil, cruel, selfish, possessive and violent. She was so unmerciful that after knowing about the prince, she cut off Rapunzel's long hair and "banished" her to a "desert where she had to live in great grief and misery" (Grimm 2004, 106). Whereas the antagonist is cruel, "wicked" and "venomous" looking (Grimm 2004, 106) in *Rapunzel*, she has not described in such an evil and wicked terms in *Tangled*. Certainly the Mother Gothel of *Tangled* is a selfish woman who continuously reminds Rapunzel that the outside world is a dangerous place, "intolerant of joy and happiness and will destroy any ray of sun shine it finds" so she should always stay in the tower (Greno and Howard 2010).

But there are some signs that make her character less evil and that show that she has some feelings for Rapunzel. For instance, she makes Rapunzel's favorite food and goes to fetch a special paint for Rapunzel as a birthday present which requires three days long trip. Even in the start of the film, her intension was not to kidnap the child. The film shows that the plant is discovered by Mother Gothel who has been using it to maintain her youth from centuries. When Rapunzel's mother becomes ill, this plant heals her. And the healing power transfers into Rapunzel's hair. Old Gothel tries to cut a lock of baby Rapunzel's hair in order to revive her youth. Doing so causes it to lose its magic and no choice was left for her. That's why she steals Rapunzel. So while Mother Gothel had a clear motive to

steal Rapunzel, Grimm's story never tells Dame Gothel's intentions that why she wants Rapunzel.

*Tangled*, even tries to break the binary of good and evil. Whereas earlier fairytale villains were only evil, Mother Gothel is a kind of unique villain, who has both positive and negative attributes. She is active and ambitious. Though she is a manipulator but before turning into a "bad guy" (Greno and Howard 2010), she is a mother who loves Rapunzel like her own daughter. Rapunzel can paint, stitch, bake, and read just because of Mother Gothel who has taught her all these things. If Gothel was really an evil person, she could have left Rapunzel completely unknowledgeable. It seems unconvincing that with the eighteen years of acquaintance, she has not developed any affection or soft corner for Rapunzel.

Mother Gothel's problem is deeply rooted in her obsession with her looks and youth. She is a kind of narcissist who is in love with herself and is very conscious about her looks. Through her character, Disney depicts a kind of queer villain suffering from loneliness and Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Like narcissists, as Dilip Jeste and Joseph Friedman (2006) has said, she has a strong "need for admiration" and lack of feelings to understand others (115). It is obvious when she looks in the mirror with Rapunzel at one point in the film and says, "Rapunzel, look, in that mirror. You know what I see? I see a strong, confident, beautiful young lady. Oh look, you're there too!" (Greno and Howard 2010). As a matter of fact, it's her youth and beauty that makes her to stab Flynn at the end of the film since she was not ready to let Rapunzel and the source of her youth go. Apart from keeping a balance through her both positive and negative personality traits, Disney also keeps balance by showing the real parents of Rapunzel. *Tangled* often shows her real parents who never lose the hope of reconciliation and she also joins them at the end. This connection is absent in Grimm Brothers' *Rapunzel*. The parents are never mentioned after the baby is born and taken by Dame Gothel.

Apart from the heroine and the villain, *Tangled* gives equally important role to the male protagonist. The very title of the film is genderless. *Tangled* also avoids prince charming stereotype that dominates the previous Disney films. The protagonist here is not a prince of any kingdom but a skilled thief. Whereas the traditional fairytale heroes have small roles, Disney gives a prominent role to its male protagonist by making him a well rounded and dynamic character. The prince in *Rapunzel* is a typical prince whose role is limited to a savior only, which suggests that women depend on men for protection and security. Even he is nameless and has been described as “King’s young son” (Grimm 2004, 106) and “the prince” in the whole story. As far as character development is concerned, he doesn’t show any development. He just comes, falls in love with Rapunzel, rescues her and leads her to his Kingdom. However, the male protagonist of *Tangled* shows character development throughout the film. Initially, he was a self centered person who only wanted to be rich. But he finds meaning in his life after meeting Rapunzel. He transforms into a more caring and concerned person, and gradually changes his priorities after meeting Rapunzel. Eventually his interest of becoming rich also melts away. He even tells Rapunzel that his real name is Eugene Fitzherbert not Flynn Rider and that he is an orphan.

It is important to note that the stereotype of masculinity is challenged in *Tangled* when men show feminine qualities like the King cries, the male protagonist sacrifices for the female protagonist, and males show concern regarding looks and beauty. At the eighteen birthday of Rapunzel, the king is shown crying as he remembers his lost daughter while his wife comforts him. The King shows an emotional and soft side which is usually associated with women and the Queen is the one who remains strong and controls her emotions. So the film reverses the gender roles and emphasizes that men can be emotional too. Moreover, the tough looking thugs in the film are not as masculine as they look. They have tough bodies but weak hearts. Unlike other fairy tales where only heroine ends up at

self sacrifice, the ending of *Tangled* suggests that sacrifice is not only women's concern but men can be sacrificing too. The idea of the beauty also reverses in *Tangled*. While only women are considered to be concerned about their looks, here men are also concerned about their looks and beauty. For example when Flynn Rider sees his wanted dead-or-alive poster, his reaction was, "Oh no. No, no, no, no, no. This is bad. This is very, very bad. This is really bad. They just can't get my nose right!" (Greno and Howard 2010).

Unlike the original story, *Tangled* avoids the implication of inappropriate material such as pregnancy and child birth. Rapunzel becomes pregnant and gives birth to twins in the original story. While *Tangled* as Kendra Magnusson (2012) states, avoid these "sexual implications of young womanhood while vilifying mature femininity..." (296).

In conclusion, Disney goes along with the same pattern of stereotypical portrayal of princesses, villains, and princes from its first film but *Tangled*, challenges this criterion of gender inequality and suggests that women can be equally powerful as men. Whereas the earliest films were just for the female audience, *Tangled* is for both male and female audience that's why the role of the male protagonist becomes equally important as the female protagonist. While Snow White, Cinderella, and Ariel are dependent and delicate heroines that demonstrate gender inequality, *Tangled* with its daring and ambitious heroine, improves the portrayal of princesses. And whereas the portrayal of evil step mothers and evil witches with the absences of a biological mother is still present in these films, *Tangled* balances it with the constant presence of real parents. Disney also balances the role of villain in *Tangled* by presenting both positive and negative traits of her personality, unlike previous films that just depict villains in negative light. While male characters' role was just limited to a savior in traditional fairytales and previous Disney films, *Tangled* makes its male protagonist a dynamic character and constantly shows his development till the end of the film. He does come for

Rapunzel's rescue by the end of the film but Rapunzel saves him more than he saves her. According to Jack Zipes (2010), a film studies scholar, traditional fairytales and the Disney films revolve around the same ideas in which, "girl falls in love with young man, often a prince...wicked witch, stepmother, or a force of evil wants to demean or kill girl...girl is rescued miraculously either by a prince or masculine helpers..."(x). It seems that new coming films are not following these criteria. Modern fairytale versions are coming with more independent female characters, where the females are depicted as warriors like, *Brave* (2012) and *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012). These films are based on the same classical fairytales but features strong heroines. Even the modern Snow White of *Snow White and the Huntsman* does not end up with marriage and happily ever after ending. Also, the most recent Disney adaptation *Frozen* (2013), based on the fairytale *The Snow Queen*, is another feminist Disney film. It is more about the bonding between two sisters than finding the love of a prince.

**Acknowledgements:** No funding available

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baker-Sperry, Lori and Liz Grauerholz. "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales." *The Kaleidoscope of Gender: Prisms, Patterns, and Possibilities*, edited by Joan Z. Spade, Catherine G. Valentin, 185-192. California: Pine Forge Press, 2011. Accessed. March 31, 2015.
- Cavallaro, Dani. *French Feminist Theory: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: A&C Black, 2004. Print.
- Cresswell, Julia, editor. *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Accessed. January 25, 2015.

- “Fairytale Too Scary for Modern Children, Say Parents,” *Telegraph.co.uk*, 2012. Accessed June 19, 2013. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newtopics/howaboutthat/9078489/Fairytale-too-scary-for-modern-children-say-parents.html>.
- Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, 1812. London: CRW publishing, 2004. Accessed. January 24, 2015.
- Jeste, Dilip and Joseph H. Friedman, editors. *Psychiatry for Neurologists*. New Jersey: Humana Press, 2006. Accessed. March 20, 2015.
- Magnusson, Kendra. “Tangled.” *Marvels & Tales* 26.2 (2012): 296. Accessed. June 11, 2013. <http://vlib.interchange.at/login?url=http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA03756383&v=2.1&u=wash89460&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=f48afbd7cad3567dfc428c7481d9ed9>.
- Manning, Jodi. “The Sociology of Hair: Hair Symbolism among College Students.” *Social Sciences Journal* 10.1 (2010): 35-48. Accessed. June 11, 2013. <http://repository.wcsu.edu/ssj/vol10/iss1/11>.
- Nesbitt, Kenn. “Rapunzel! Rapunzel!” *My Hippo has the Hiccups: And Other Poems I Totally Made Up*. Edited by. Ethan Long. Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2009. Accessed. March 15, 2015.
- Stitch, Thompson. *The Folktale*. 1946. California: University of California Press, 1977. Accessed. March 22, 2015.
- Tangled*. Directed by Nathan Greno and Byron Howard. 2010. California: Walt Disney Studio Motion Pictures, 2011. DVD.
- Zipes, Jack. “Foreword: Grounding the Spell: The Fairy Tale Film and Transformation.” *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*. Edited by Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix. Logan: Utah State University, 2010. Print.

Zohrab, Peter D. *Sex, Lies & Feminism*. 2000. Paraparaumu: New Zealand Equality Part, 2002. Accessed. March 21, 2015.