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REDEFINED GENDER ROLES IN FAIRY TALES: A STUDY OF *THE PAPER BAG PRINCESS* BY
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For centuries, the stories meant for bedtimes and for kindergarten were mostly fairy tales containing the princesses and princes or Brothers Grimm. They have all directly or indirectly paved a gender stereotype in the minds of children at a very young age over each gender. Female characters are portrayed to be very delicate, attention-seeking, highly dressed up and easily frightened, while male characters are comparatively stronger, handsome or not very handsome, rich or not very rich, protective and saviour. On a vantage outlook, it can also be found that most of the princesses or the female protagonists are royals, but that is not the case with male characters: they are either princes or common men. Despite being a royal, the princesses always need a prince for their security and rescue. Many stories end with the rescue and enlightenment in the princess's lives only after the arrival of the prince.

However, with the second wave of feminism, many concepts and realities were altered and they were looked upon with a new outlook. The movement was aimed at achieving equality in sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, de facto inequalities, and official legal inequalities. Equality was sought after in all fields and women-centric and feministic writings saw its rise. The movement began to question the gender and genitive stereotyping of the men as well as women. Understanding the importance of women empowerment and esteem, many writers strove to break these chains on stereotypes by re-writing the roles of characters. This resulted in many works having no more damsels in distress and knights in shining armour. One among such writer was Robert N. Munsch, who was widely acclaimed and appreciated for his children's tale *The Paper Bag Princess* that broke from the above-said stereotypes on gender.

The story revolves around Princess Elizabeth, who despite losing all her wealth saves her Prince with her wit from the dragon. However, when the Prince shames her for her un-princess attire, she dumps and leaves him for better. The tale portrays the female character with a strong sense, wit and attitude, who doesn't need a Prince to save her from a distress. The story, which is meant for very young readers, was published as an illustrated book that runs for 32 pages in the year 1980.

On the importance of gender studies, Elaine Blakemore, a psychology professor at Indiana University-Purdue University says that kids can begin forming gender stereotypes at a very young age, sometimes as young as one year old. It is also scientifically told that, a child can grow to identify a sex by the age of three. Hence, the role that the fairy tales play in punching an image of the gender traits is very important. Among many feministic and gender positive stories for children, *The Paper Bag Princess* holds a special place as it brings out a very striking truth that females can be active saviours and machos while it's completely normal for males to be in the state of wanting help and also being passive. It also helps in lifting the burden placed on the children on gender based characterization.

The tale *The Paper Bag Princess* begins with a very exultant note, introducing the protagonists Princess Elizabeth and Prince Ronald on their wedding day. However, a dragon flies above them and burns up their kingdom and takes the prince away with it. Here, it must be noted that the victim is not of any particular

gender alone, but both the princess and the prince. The princess decides to chase the dragon and rescue the prince, unlike the typical instances where the saviour would be the male. She could only find a paper bag as an alternative to her dress, which she wears it boldly and sets off to find her prince. This breaks the beauty and etiquette standards set on the females. She traces the trails of burnt ashes on the ground and finally finds the dragon. Knowing that the creature would tire after being made to excessively task, she wilfully asks the dragon to show if it can burn an entire forest to ashes, as if she were naïve. Taking it as a challenge, the proud dragon burns down the forest and exhausts all its fire. As the next step, Elizabeth asks if the dragon can cover the entire distance of the world in under ten seconds, which the dragon does twice, ultimately making it go into deep sleep because of physical tiredness. This portrays women as witty thinkers who can act without the need to battle physically. The princess, then, walks over the sleeping dragon and reaches the prince, who is all handsome and neatly combed and dressed. In spite of being rescued by the princess, he tells her ungratefully that she smells ashes and that her hair is all in tangles and then asks her to come back after dressing up as a princess is fit to be. This reaction by the prince shows the stereotype that men have associated with women. In response, with quick realization, sense and audacity, Elizabeth dumps Ronald for being a "bum". She says, "your clothes are really pretty and your hair is all neat. You look like a real prince, but you are a bum"

Her reply to Ronald depicts and instills various messages in the reader. The reaction and decision of Elizabeth show the need for women to have self-esteem, be witty and make spontaneous decisions.

Moreover, the tale does not end on a very happy note. The tale says,

"They do not marry after all"

Though the story is not the typical happily-ever-after, it portrays how even an unexpected disappointment can be treated lightly, just like Elizabeth, who walks and dances in the sunset all by herself without worries.

Not only does this story depict a new image of a woman, a princess, who meets danger head-on and rises above vanity to imagine new possibilities for her life, but also what feminists have long hoped for, that women would become independent, rational actors rather than decorative objects tied to the whims and fortunes of men. The story also came to express the patriarchal set-up of the society. Being a pioneer of its kind, the story became the milestone from where many gender-positive works were begun to be written and published. Gender positive learning at a young age, puts forth the idea that there is no demarcating line in-between femininity and masculinity in the minds of children, unless they are thought against it.

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