

UNIVERSAL VALUES IN FAIRY TALES: ORAL TRADITIONS AND CROSS-CULTURAL ETHICS

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Abstract

The enduring appeal of fairy tales lies in their ability to convey universal values and act as a cross-cultural medium through oral storytelling traditions. This study assesses how Indian and Western fairy tales like *The Panchatantra*, *Jataka Tales*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Grimm's Fairy Tales* preserve and transmit timeless values that transcend cultural boundaries. These stories share foundational moral themes despite their cultural specificity, as they are built on universal human values. The analysis of these stories demonstrates that they provide moral education, strengthen social bonds and support shared identities through generations. The study also considers modern versions like those by Michael Cunningham and Disney, which keep these values meaningful and relevant for contemporary audience. By examining both traditional and modern fairy tales, the study evaluates the role of fairy tales as cultural connectors that uphold ethical principles and contribute to moral learning across diverse societies.

Keywords: Contemporary adaptations, Cross-cultural ethics, Fairy tales, Moral education, Oral traditions, Universal values

Introduction

Fairy tales have been cherished across generations for their magical stories and the values they teach that people from all cultures can understand and relate to. These tales passed down through oral

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traditions, carry important lessons about kindness, justice and empathy. Although each culture has its own unique distinct versions, the core values in these stories are similar which makes fairy tales a shared source of moral guidance for people worldwide. In addition to providing moral instruction, fairy tales play a subtle yet powerful role in influencing children's worldviews. As Zipes observes "Fairy tales are political. They help to form children's values and teach them to accept our society and their roles in it" (179). The theme of 'Universal Human Values' in fairy tales provides ethical paths that remain relevant over time. These stories guide children and adults alike in handling life's challenges and understanding right from wrong regardless of cultural origin. The recurring appearance of these values in stories from different regions suggests a common human need to learn and pass on qualities like compassion, courage and integrity.

The analysis compares Indian and Western fairy tales to teach the universal values which are expressed in different cultures. By examining stories from *The Panchatantra* and *Jataka Tales* alongside *Beauty and the Beast* and *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, the comparative perspective aims to show that fairy tales act as tools for moral education and help strengthen social connections. Recent adaptations have further shaped these values to match contemporary ideals, where "contemporary values of equality, intelligence, determination, assertiveness, and physical fitness are replacing previous patriarchal ideologies of women including passive obedience, fragility, silence, youth, and unrelenting beauty" (Brugué and Llompart 105). The evolution is visible in the works of authors like Michael Cunningham and in Disney adaptations, where traditional values are preserved yet blended with ideals that depict personal strength and self-worth. By showing how fairy tales evolve as cultural connections, the study illustrates their role in strengthening personal character and community bonds. It demonstrates that fairy tales are not just historical stories but they continue to inspire and reflect society's shared values.

Oral Tradition and the Transmission of Values

Oral traditions have long served as important cultural tools, preserving and passing down stories, values and wisdom before societies had written records. In many cultures, fairy tales and folktales spread through word of mouth, acting as cultural narratives that carry moral teachings and life lessons to new generations. These stories reflect

the values and beliefs of their originating cultures, yet they also speak to universal themes that extend across cultural boundaries. It demonstrates that certain values like kindness and perseverance are widely appreciated. Čvorović and Coe contend, "Traditional stories can describe a people's origin, ancestors, gods, and moral codes," incorporating cultural values in a way that makes them memorable and accessible to listeners (9). It illustrates that even as oral stories vary by culture, they serve the universal function of teaching cultural identity and ethics, highlighting the shared human need to pass on morals and principles.

Charles Perrault's "Cinderella" depicts enduring qualities like patience and kindness through Cinderella's experiences. Despite facing constant mistreatment from her stepmother and stepsisters who force her into servitude, Cinderella remains gentle and does not respond with anger. She even helps her stepsisters prepare for the royal ball, showing compassion toward those who have wronged her. This moment illustrates her kindness and humility. Her eventual reward of being granted the chance to attend the ball and winning the prince's favour reinforces that patience and goodness are virtues that lead to positive outcomes. The story suggests to audience that true worth lies in a gentle, forgiving spirit. Although "Cinderella" is a Western tale, these qualities are universally appreciated, as many cultures admire characters who show kindness and patience despite challenges. This universal appeal shows that Cinderella's core values connect with people worldwide which depicts the common ideals of compassion and inner strength.

Similarly, the Indian *Jataka Tales* carry strong messages about selflessness and empathy. In the story of "The Monkey King," a monkey leader sacrifices himself by creating a bridge from his own body, allowing his fellow monkeys to escape from the human king's soldiers. Such selflessness is similar to a soldier who sacrifices himself to protect his country, embodying courage and compassion. These tales "carry with [them a] moral, implied if not expressed," with messages delivered so subtly that "even the teller knows not what axe he may be grinding" (Bruner 5-6). This approach allows morals to be absorbed naturally, encouraging listeners to embrace values of humanity and empathy. The tale surpasses cultural specifics and teaches that real strength comes from being selfless and compassionate. It delivers the message relatable to everyone, regardless of background or culture. These examples illustrate how oral storytelling traditions, even when rooted in distinct cultural backgrounds convey ethical teachings that are universally

understood. Perrault's "Cinderella" and the *Jataka Tales* show that oral tales discuss themes corresponding to the universal need for moral guidance. Through such stories, communities pass on lessons that shape how people view virtues like kindness, fortitude and empathy. This role of oral traditions in teaching and preserving values focuses on cultural preservation and the understanding of civilisation. It illustrates that tales with deep cultural roots cultivate a common ethical understanding across different societies.

Moral Education through Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are usually among the first stories children hear, imparting lessons in courage, kindness and justice that influence their understanding of morality. These tales are not merely for entertainment but provide insights into ethical thinking by depicting relatable situations where choices carry consequences. According to David Lewin, "Some tales seem to lend themselves better than others for this kind of systematic pedagogical treatment, and so over time a canon forms of stories suited to moral edification" (9). It suggests that certain fairy tales are more apt than others to teach moral values, forming a canon that has evolved over time to shape moral education. "Hansel and Gretel" by the Brothers Grimm teaches the values of ingenuity and family support. In this tale, two siblings, abandoned in a dark forest, rely on each other to overcome their challenges and outwit a dangerous witch. Their cooperation and perseverance in the face of adversity show young readers that even in frightening situations, working together and staying determined leads to a solution. For children, this story is a lesson in trust, problem-solving and the strength found in family bonds.

Similarly, *Beauty and the Beast* by Jeanne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont teaches empathy and the value of inner character over appearances. Beauty chooses to sacrifice her comfort to save her father and in living with the Beast, she learns to appreciate his kindness beneath his intimidating appearance. Her journey illustrates that true worth is found in compassion and inner qualities rather than external beauty which delivers an important moral lesson about looking beyond appearances. Jane Beal rightly observes that "Beauty is not a one-dimensional allegorical personification, but rather a dynamic character. Her loveliness is not only in her appearance, but in her inquisitive mind and innocent heart and genuine moral character" (3). Beauty's character, in this way, embodies empathy and moral integrity which underlines her inner qualities as the

source of her true beauty. Comparing tales like “Hansel and Gretel” and “Beauty and the Beast” creates ethical frameworks for young listeners, guiding them in their understanding of goodness, courage and empathy. In this way, fairy tales reflect cultural values that serve as a lasting and accessible resource for moral development over time.

Social Cohesion and Cultural Identity in Fairy Tales

Fairy tales build social unity and play a major role in moulding and preserving cultural identity. They represent the values, customs and beliefs of a culture, teaching each new generation about the ideals that define their community. The Grimms’ tales, in particular, hold a “ubiquitous cultural presence, even if they appear adapted, refashioned, reconfigured, and often profoundly reinvented” (Tatar 59). The constant reinvention allows these stories to remain relevant spanning centuries while maintaining the cultural essence that binds communities. For example, in “The Bremen Town Musicians,” by the Brothers Grimm, four animals team up after being abandoned due to their old age. When they reach a cottage occupied by robbers, they work together to scare the robbers away, each using their unique voice to create a fearsome song. This act of cooperation is not just about teamwork but also reflects aspects of German folk culture. The tale shows the German countryside, traditional village life and values such as perseverance and self-reliance, which are central to the German cultural identity. Through the animals’ journey and cooperation, the story conveys a sense of pride in overcoming hardship and relying on one’s own skills and ideals that have historically connected with German audience. The story acts as a point of connection which reinforces a shared cultural identity around these core values and collective experiences.

Similarly, Indian tales like “The Loyal Mongoose,” from the *Panchatantra* capture unique aspects of Indian social values and family life, which are integral to Indian cultural identity. In this story, a mongoose protects a child from a snake and displays loyalty to the family. However, due to a misunderstanding, the mother kills the mongoose, thinking it harmed her child. This tragic situation reflects the importance of close familial bonds and careful judgment that are deeply rooted in Indian society. Additionally, the presence of animals as symbols of moral lessons illustrates the cultural association with nature and respect for living beings which is common in Indian storytelling. By teaching lessons on family loyalty and caution, “The Loyal Mongoose” preserves cultural values while

strengthening identity and passing on traditions specific to Indian culture. It reflects the idea of “the harmonious coexistence of the tradition and values of two or more cultural groups” (Stavrou 528). Stories like these exemplify the blend of traditional values and moral lessons, reinforcing a collective sense of belonging. These examples demonstrate that fairy tales carry cultural identity which reflects civilisation, social structure and the preservation of heritage.

Universal Human Values in Cross-Cultural Fairy Tales

Fairy tales from different cultures convey similar values which display a shared human ethos that exceeds geographical and cultural boundaries. These stories, while rooted in unique traditions relate to key themes like justice and respect for nature which shows how human societies universally prioritise certain ethics. For instance, in “Snow White” by the Brothers Grimm, the theme of justice is clear. The wicked queen driven by vanity and cruelty poisons Snow White out of jealousy but ultimately faces death as punishment for her actions. This lesson on justice resembles Indian stories such as “The Clever Jackal,” in which the clever jackal outwits those who intend harm where cleverness and integrity prevail. Both tales illustrate that the wrongdoers, regardless of their power or influence, ultimately face the consequences of their actions. This moral of justice teaches that good ultimately overcomes evil and encourages the audience to value righteousness and integrity.

Additionally, themes of interpersonal connection and compassion are evident across Western and Indian fairy tales. Researchers observe that “folk tales emphasize values related to human connection,” with common themes including “Relationships, Helping-others, Family, Significant-other, and Children” (Wu et al. 5115). This focus on human connection is reflected in stories like “The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids,” where a mother goat risks her life to rescue her children, embodying family unity and protection. In the Indian *Jataka Tales*, animals represent qualities such as loyalty and self-sacrifice. For example, in the tale of “The Elephant and the Blind Men,” the elephant patiently helps the blind men understand his form and teaches lessons on empathy and understanding. Both traditions upholding respect for animals suggest ecological ethics fundamental across cultures and teach lessons on benevolence and kindness toward all creatures.

At the same time, cultural contexts influence how audience understand these universal values. As researchers explain, “Western

readers read a literary text with a more individual-oriented interpretation style, while East Asian readers comprehend the same story with the tendency of a more society-oriented interpretation” (Zhang and Lauer 665). This shows that while universal values like justice and compassion exist across cultures, their interpretation matches the cultural focus on either individual achievement or collective harmony. Such comparisons illustrate that fairy tales convey universal values which affirm that humanity shares common ideals, regardless of cultural differences.

Contemporary Relevance of Fairy Tale Values

Modern adaptations of classic fairy tales introduce situations that reflect current societal issues while preserving the core values of the original stories. It makes these values more accessible and meaningful to the present audience. For instance, in Michael Cunningham’s *A Wild Swan and Other Tales*, the story of *Beauty and the Beast* is reimagined with a deep focus on the Beast’s psychological struggles. Cunningham portrays the Beast not just as a figure with a physical transformation but as one burdened by emotional conflicts and insecurities. For instance, the Beast is described as having an “impeccably handsome” face, but “the eyes remain feral” and his “mouth seems capable, still, of tearing out the throat of a deer” (Cunningham 115). The image illustrates the Beast’s struggle between his outward appearance and inner turmoil, a struggle that connects with modern issues like body image and self-acceptance. The retelling justifies that true transformation comes from within and not from a change in appearance. It adds relatability for modern readers who face similar internal challenges. The narrative encourages readers to look past superficial judgments and find strength and acceptance within themselves.

In modern adaptations, *Cinderella* has evolved to reflect contemporary values while still preserving its core moral lessons. Recent versions of *Cinderella* adapt her character with traits such as independence, self-worth and inner strength which makes her journey more consistent with present-day ideals. As noted in *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*, “the trend in screen Cinderellas has been towards contemporization—keeping the original setting, but injecting contemporary values” (Zipes 100). The transition illustrates that oral and literary traditions are adaptable, allowing tales to evolve with cultural shifts while retaining their original virtues. By modernising *Cinderella* to reflect characteristics like self-reliance

and independence, these adaptations enhance her character with qualities that the contemporary audience finds valuable. In Disney's live-action adaptation, for instance, Cinderella takes an active role in moulding her future. She holds onto her self-belief and dignity, which allows her to exemplify traditional virtues of kindness and perseverance along with modern ideals of empowerment and self-respect.

Similarly, in Disney's 2019 adaptation of *Aladdin*, the characters are developed in new ways that focus on the themes of empowerment and determination. Jasmine's role is expanded to give her the goal of becoming a leader in her own right, challenging the traditional narrative where princesses wait for rescue or validation. In the song "Speechless," Jasmine boldly declares, "I won't be silenced / You can't keep me quiet" (Menken et al.). This powerful message is particularly relevant in light of contemporary movements advocating gender equality and women's empowerment. Aladdin also faces the moral challenge of honesty when he becomes Prince Ali to win Jasmine's favour. Aladdin admits, "I'm not a prince. I'm just a guy from the street" (Menken et al.), encapsulates his internal struggle with honesty and integrity. This moment demonstrates the universal value of being true to oneself, regardless of external pressures or expectations. By adopting these values with issues of self-acceptance, empowerment and honesty, Disney demonstrates that the timeless messages in *Aladdin* are relevant to the contemporary audience. These new perspectives honour the story's original themes while they emphasise cultural identity in a modern context and demonstrate how fairy tales adapt while maintaining their ethical essence.

Conclusion

The fairy tales from both Western and Indian traditions convey a set of universal human values that unite cultures and generations. These stories, whether they originate from the Brothers Grimm, Indian fables or modern adaptations, consistently uphold principles such as kindness, perseverance, justice and respect for others and nature. For example, in "Snow White," readers are shown the importance of righteousness, where the wicked queen faces consequences for her cruelty, while tales like "The Monkey King" from the Jataka stories teach selflessness and compassion for others. Despite cultural differences, these narratives demonstrate that certain values hold the universal prioritisation of ethics across societies. The study further shows that modern retellings of classic tales adapt these values to address contemporary issues. Works like Michael Cunningham's *A*

Wild Swan and Other Tales reinterpret traditional stories to explore themes like self-acceptance and personal struggles, making the lessons of classic tales more relatable for contemporary readers. Similarly, Disney's adaptations, such as *Aladdin*, preserve themes of courage, honesty and selflessness while incorporating aspects that reflect modern social challenges. The adaptability demonstrates the everlasting strength of fairy tales to keep their moral essence alive while evolving with changing cultures and ethics. Ultimately, fairy tales remain timeless guides for ethical learning and enduring symbols of cultural unity.

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