



Cinderella Complex: A Critical Analysis of *Sanarembi and Chaishra*

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Abstract: Historically, folktales are a cultural repository that plays a major role in showcasing the societal representation of women and their roles in society. “Cinderella Complex” is an idea that suggests women are terrified of independence. This Complex is echoed in the Manipuri folktale *Sanarembi and Chaishra* by B. Jayantakumar and Dr. Chirom Rajketan Singh. The study employs a critical analysis from a feminist lens on the female characters in the narrative. This narrative reflects a woman’s expectation of a man to rescue her from the evil bondage of the jealous Stepmother and Stepsister. The paper examines the traditional qualities of female characters in the narrative that serve as the basis of the protagonist and antagonist. The study aims to make a critical analysis of these characters by exploring the protagonist’s destiny with the influence of external agents like man and examining the portrayal of gender oppression through traditional female qualities, by being submissive and passive. This tale highlights societal representation of women’s beauty as the sole element of marriage for women’s redemption and a happy life. On the other hand, the narrative showcases the lack of female solidarity.

Keywords: Cinderella Complex, protagonist, femininity, antagonist, marriage.

Introduction

As Martin Hallett and Barbara Karasek (2009) states that folktale is exactly the tale of the people or folks and the representation of the culture and tradition of the common people who are mostly illiterate where “their tales were orally transmitted; in order words passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, until they were eventually recorded and published by such famous individuals as Charles Perrault and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm” (Hallett and Karasek 15). Folktales are orally passed down, and the narratives are socially and culturally based on counters and experiences. *Sanarembi and Chaishra* (2014) is one of the Manipuri folktales in *Folktales of Manipur* by B. Jayantakumar Sharma and Dr. Chirom Rajketan Singh of North-East India, Manipur. This folktale highlights aspects of femininity, a submissive, passive, and limited role of female agency.

Even though folktales and fairytales vary in various dimensions, there is a distinct relation between them. Folktales are orally passed down, and as Martin Hallett and Barbara Karasek in *Folk & Fairy Tales* (2009) attribute that fairy tales are the version of those oral narratives that are compiled in written forms as books, which further serves to retell those narratives exactly as they are documented. Hence, it cannot be denied that some forms of fairy tales originated from folktales, and without the existence of folktales, fairy tales cannot exist. *The Cinderella Complex* is a term coined by Colette Dowling in her book *The Cinderella Complex: Women’s Hidden Fear of Independence* (1981). This book talks about how women are instilled with the idea of being saved, perpetuating the feeling of being scared to be liberated and independent. She reflects on her personal experiences, pondering upon the psychological desire to be saved by her husband in her married life. She also states that it is tolerable to depend on someone if the dependency is healthy and does not consume one’s self-esteem. As Jeslin Babu Joseph, Sanjaly Jayesh and Sannet Thomas states in their article that the idea of this concept is influenced by the fairy tale heroine Cinderella, where the tale is “based on the idea of femininity portrayed in the story, where a woman is beautiful, graceful, polite, supportive, hardworking, independent, and maligned by the females of her society, but she is not capable of changing her situations with her own actions” (Joseph et al. 325) and this makes woman compel to be saved by external force especially male. Moreover, this complex also highlights the characteristics of Cinderella having no hard feelings and bad intention to the wicked stepmother and the stepsisters who keep on oppressing her and also states that the only way for a woman “to conquer injustice is to be patient and noble, and to wait for the day when the reward for her perseverance comes in the form of a man” (Joseph et al. 325). Coming to the narrative plot of *Sanarembi*, it draws a similar trait of this Complex, highlighting the aspect of not resisting against the female rivalry trope but depending on the prince as the external force to change her fate. This indicates the psychological dependency that women possess, as stated by Colette Dowling. *Sanarembi*, the protagonist, is also blessed with feminine virtues of physical beauty, kind-heartedness, and patience. The folktale is a story of a king’s nobleman who has two wives, where *Sanarembi* is the daughter of the first wife, and *Chaishra* is the daughter of the wicked second wife. The narrative revolves around the ill-treatment and evil schemes of *Sanarembi*’s

stepmother and stepsister after the death of the father. The stepmother murders Sanarembi's mother by pouring snakes into her mouth. As the story progresses, the prince falls in love with Sanarembi and makes her his wife. Eventually, the stepsister and the stepmother kill Sanarembi out of jealousy, and Chaishra, the stepsister, impersonates the prince's wife. By magical intervention, Sanarembi comes back first in the form of a dove, and secondly as a lemon, and later comes back as a human form after complying with the instruction to keep the lemon for five days. Finally, the story ends with a happy ending, and the wicked Chaishra is banished by the prince.

Sanarembi is saved at the end from the hands of her stepmother and jealous stepsister only because she is married to the prince. This reflects the aspect that "Just as systematically, females are taught that they have an out that someday, in some way, they are going to be saved" (Dowling 4) and "We were taught to believe that as women we cannot stand alone, that we are too fragile, too delicate, needful of protection" (Dowling 20). Sanarembi and her mother's reincarnation in the form of a tortoise, dove, and lemon fruit, trying to come back to normal, ordinary life with the help of external intervention, mirrors women's dependency to save them. This folktale portrays Sanarembi and her mother, Yangkhureima's suffering and ill-treatment. But after tremendous challenges and struggles, the tale has a happy ending by reinforcing certain themes of hope and triumph. Sanarembi possesses the qualities of kindness, beauty, and patience that are stereotypically considered the traits of female values in society. The end of Sanarembi's suffering is only through marriage to the prince, who is of higher authority. However, looking from feminist perspectives, this narrative also reflects the dangerous stereotype, highlighting the notion that women see their fellow females as rivals, perpetuating the female rival trope through the characters of evil Stepmother Sangkhureima and Stepsister Chaishra. Folktales generally highlight to their audience the moral values of humankind, and of evil doers, and their consequences.

Methodology

This qualitative research uses *Folktales of Manipur* (2014) by B. Jayantakumar Sharma and Dr. Chirom Rajketan Singh, translated by Kamaljit Chirom, as a Primary Source and *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence* (1981) by Colette Dowling as a Secondary Source, along with related articles and books for textual analysis. Those related Secondary Sources are searched using keywords such as *Cinderella Complex*, *Cinderella Complex in Folktales*, and *Women in Folktales* to support the argument. It also employs MLA 9th Edition for citation.

Feminist Critique of Sanarembi

B. Jayantakumar Sharma's *Sanarembi and Chaishra* is a story about Sanarembi, who is "not only a beautiful girl, but also kind and well-mannered" (Sharma and Singh 16), ill-treated by her wicked stepmother and jealous stepsister Chaishra. Everybody likes Sanarembi for her obedient and passive quality. On the other hand, Chaishra is ugly with "thick brows", and there is "no comparison of her wickedness" (16). Moreover, Chaishra has no brother, while Sanarembi has one. These serve as the major factors that the stepmother and Chaishra are desperately jealous of Sanarembi and her beloved mother. Sanarembi is helped by *dreams* and *magical force*. The murder of Sanarembi's mother by the stepmother is known through her dream, and Sanarembi's death and identity theft by Chaishra are made known to her husband, the prince, by appearing in his dreams. Sanarembi's mother appear in her dream saying that she is been killed by the stepmother while fishing together so the mother directs her to go fishing the next morning and "will find me in the form of a tortoise...catch me and put me in the *isaiphu* (pitcher) for five days. After five days I will be a woman" (Sharma and Singh 18). The plan to resurrect Sanarembi's life by the prince is also through the strategic intervention of a dream where she gives him instruction to "Pluck the lemon when it is ripe. Keep it for five days inside *chengphu* (rice pot), I will come back to you as your Sanarembi" (Sharma and Singh 24).

The narrative revolves around Chaishra and the stepmother's jealousy, where their sole aim is to take everything that belongs to Sanarembi and ruin her life till the very end. Both always formulate plans to kill Sanarembi and impersonate her identity as the prince's wife. This mirrors the interchangeability of women's position and status in the patriarchal hierarchy. This folktale takes the audience into a fantastic world with magical force and interesting schemes of the wicked female characters to put the protagonist under their authority. It also highlights the societal norms that women are positioned in society, depicting female heroines or protagonists as passive and submissive, with the absence of female agency to manoeuvre her way out from the torture and torment they receive from evil female tropes, or simply known as antagonists. We see Sanarembi depending on the external agent, like the prince, for her liberation and redemption. Even though Sanarembi goes through many hardships and difficulties, she does not try to vigorously overcome her challenges but rather endures without resistance. This quality is reflected in the scene when the stepmother orders her to boil the tortoise, and she obeys the stepmother's command. Even while knowing the fact that boiling the tortoise will disrupt Sanarembi's plan to resurrect her late mother, she silently obeys instead of resisting and keeps on tending the fire even after her head is burnt again by the stepmother. Sanarembi is trapped in their control without standing up for herself to bring a change in her ill-fated life. This mirrors that the "representation of women as passive beings reinforces the idea that women must endure suffering without resistance rather than seek independence or fight for justice" (Jolly and Chauhan d366). Another such aspect is that Sanarembi is never given the chance to give her opinion about the prince's love for her, but without any words, the prince comes over and takes her to his palace by putting her on his horse. Though it sounds romantic and fascinating, the hidden message it portrays is such that the consent and opinion of those with uneven power hold no value and meaning for those who are of higher authority. She does not have the autonomy to choose her future partner. This happens because women as a whole "are not just excluded from power...actively avoiding it" (Dowling 36).

The Echo of Cinderella Complex

Colette Dowling introduced the concept of the *Cinderella Complex* in her book *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence*, 1982, which popularised the concept of women's psychological fear of independence, expecting men to rescue them from their incapable life circumstances. As Nimrat Randhawa and Dr Shruti Dutt explained that it also refers to women's unconscious longing for male's attention to save and take care of them in times of their difficult situation and further says that "this complex (low self-esteem) is a defence mechanism that is created within the unconsciousness of a female as a natural response to the fundamental issue that she is unworthy or less important than other people (men)" (Randhawa & Dutt 891).

We do not find Sanarembi's mother advising her to be courageous or encouraging her to fight and stand up for herself, but instead instructing her to depend on magical intervention. Knowing the fact that Sanarembi and her mother are tortured by the female stepmother trope, they never try to step up with resistance to change their fate. This happens because "as children, females are not taught to be assertive and independent; indeed, they are taught to be non-assertive and dependent" (Dowling 33). Sanarembi's need to depend on an external agent like the prince to save herself from ill-treatment is her way "of dealing with an issue that they can't fix on their own" (Randhawa & Dutt 891). This reflects the subtle lack of female agency from the mother, as she never teaches Sanarembi to overcome and stand for herself. This aspect can also be seen when Sanarembi silently follows the prince to his palace. Her opinion of the prince's love does not matter, but what matters most is to be with the prince, who is of higher authority to take her away from the stepmother and stepsister's evil torments, highlighting her lack of assertiveness and independent opinion. Though there is no actual interpretation in the narrative, it can also be analysed that her father's absence in her life during her prime years makes her have no hope for a happy marriage. Henceforth, this can serve as one of the reasons for being passive and silently following the prince to the palace to save herself. Moreover, it can be viewed that female dependence is "upon finding a romantic partner who will satisfy their goals, provide for them, or rescue them from tough situations" (Randhawa & Dutt 893). In general, women are expected to rely within the patriarchal structure under men's authority.

Marriage and the Prince as the Saviour

The unfair and ill-treatment of Sanarembi within the family makes her dependent on men and marriage as an outlet to escape from the stepmother and stepsister. This dependence reflects her dread of autonomy to alter her fate. It unveils her subconscious longing to take care of her incapable circumstances because "yearning for care may stem from a tacit agreement that women are subordinate to men...their worth is dependent on them" (Nusbaumer 228). Sanarembi's marriage to the prince happens because he is mesmerised by her beauty and timid nature. Her physical appearance is considered the seductive element to charm the prince, even if it is not done intentionally. Sanarembi's happiness is the romanticised rescue by the prince's recognition and asking for her hand in marriage. As Estelle Ruoxing Nusbaumer states in the article, about Cinderella stereotype states that the sole "resolution of the primary issue, specifically the protagonist's escape from their family, is inextricably linked to marriage...the ultimate resolution" (Nusbaumer 231). The escape from Sanarembi's suffering is her marriage, where the prince serves as the external agent to rescue her. But the ultimate end to her suffering is only when she activates the prince's attention to her situation, and as a matter of fact, the prince banishes and punishes the wrongdoers. The way to Sanarembi's happiness and redemption is the activation of being rescued by the prince through physical beauty and marriage. The palace becomes Sanarembi's safe place to refrain from the evil schemes of the stepmother and stepsister. Marriage here is not just an escape for Sanarembi but plays a crucial role in the ordination of power within the patriarchal hierarchy.

Conclusion

Too much of expectations to be taken care of or to be rescued in incapable situations make women suppress from growth emotionally. In this matter, the *Cinderella Complex* is considered unhealthy and can affect women's subconsciousness. Through the female character Sanarembi, this study reveals the intricacies that women go through subconsciously when they are helpless, fearing to take responsibilities, and alter their ill-fated circumstances. This calls for women's yearning for external agents to reinforce and save them from such conditions. The female rival trope in the narrative depicts a position where females are unable to tolerate and be efficient towards other female females. The stepmother and stepsister never stop scheming against Sanarembi, planning to ruin her life and marriage till the very end. It showcases the lack of female solidarity and empathy. If Sanarembi's relationship with the stepmother remains genuine from the very beginning, and her relation to the stepsister is more affectionate, not just as stepsisters but as real ones, the position and situation that Sanarembi is labelled would never have happened. We can conclude that the cause of Sanarembi's *Cinderella Complex* is her desire to survive and escape from the wicked tortures and abuses.

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