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Satirical Feminism in *Castle in the Air*: A New Way to Reflect Feminist Fairy Tales

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I. On *Castle in the Air* and Feminist Fairy Tale Retellings

People have been rewriting fairy tales from a feminist perspective for the past few decades because most believe the sexist messages that fairy tales convey are disruptive for children. Scholars such as Jazmin Santiago claim that the major problem with fairy tales is that they too often portray women as helpless and waiting for men's rescue. However, while contemporary feminist fairy tale retellers know better than to simply reverse the gender roles, they often fall into the trap of merely making the female characters strong and overlook other problems. The problem of such retellings has led to such a strong norm that it has nearly became a gender ideology itself, which is women should always be strong. Studies about feminist fairy tale retellings, hence, also became trapped in this box of looking for only strong female characters and fail to see the problems that many contemporary fairy tale retellings have.

One example different from common fairy tale retellings is *Castle in the Air*, a young adult fantasy novel whose target readers are 10–14-year-olds. The novel was written by Diana Wynne Jones, first published in 1990, and is a companion to the more well-known book, *Howl's Moving Castle*. The story revolves around Abdullah, a carpet merchant from Zanzib, and his adventure to defeat evil and marry a princess. The plots are based on stories from the *Arabian Nights*, which readers can tell from seeing familiar characters such as a genie and a magic carpet.

Castle in the Air and the *Arabian Nights* have a distinct characteristic in common—they both feature sexist male protagonists, yet both are also, at least in part, feminist. In the *Arabian Nights*, a king disrespects women and kills one every night until he meets Dunyazad, who, when visiting her sister that the king plans to kill that night, tells him stories so wonderful that he ends up postponing killing her sister so that he can learn what happens next in the stories. Thus, the *Arabian Nights* actually fits the norm of having a strong female protagonist. In *Castle in the Air*, the male protagonist Abdullah looks down on women, sees them as objects, and believes in gender stereotypes; however, he later learns that, in order to achieve his goals, he needs the female characters' help.

Castle in the Air may not look like a feminist retelling at first glance because, unlike the *Arabian Nights*, from the very beginning, we see the male protagonist being rude and sexist to almost every female character, and women do not necessarily resist. In contrast, in previous studies on feminist retellings, scholars such as Santiago and Linda T. Parsons mostly examine stories with a female focalizer/protagonist, such as "Snow White" and "Cinderella." In such stories, after a contemporary rewriting, these female characters are oftentimes strong and not oppressed. However, there are limitations in narrowly defining a feminist retelling as one where the protagonist is a strong woman who is free from oppression.

For instance, one limitation is that creating such ideal worlds are a move too naïve and far from the truth, as many women to this day still experience sexism. More importantly, I believe it is not only possible but also potentially advantageous

to use an unreliable and sexist male focalizer/protagonist to write a satirical feminist fairy tale retelling, which is what *Castle in the Air* does. According to Gloria Kaufman, satirical feminism "is didactic and often overtly so. No matter how pessimistic it sounds, it seeks to improve us by demonstrating—through devices of irony, of exaggeration, of sarcasm, and of wit—our human folly" ("Introduction" 14). To take a case in point, Jane Austen uses satirical feminism when writing about the character Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, who strongly believes in gender ideologies but is portrayed as a laughable character and, hence, ridiculed by not only the female protagonist, but also the readers.

In my opinion, this technique can be even more impactful than writing about strong female protagonists in sexism-free worlds because it is more relatable and less idealized. It is especially important for the authors of fairy tale retellings, whose target audiences are often children, to give them a less limited picture of feminism. In addition, in today's society, where feminism and feminists are labeled with negative words, writing feminist works using satirical feminism will make it easier for audiences to accept the message and even help create a more positive image of feminism.

II. What is Considered a Good Feminist Fairy Tale Retelling?

Then, what do scholars consider a good feminist fairy tale retelling and why have they constructed such a narrow definition?

Linda T. Parsons mentions a good feminist retold "Cinderella" that makes Cinderella into a focalizer and share her story about going on an adventure (92), and Jazmin Santiago mentions a retold "Snow White" that has a female protagonist that is strong (83). In both works that Parsons and Santiago examine, few male characters are mentioned, and we do not see any oppression or sexism being a problem for the female protagonists. If we generalize from these studies, a good feminist fairy tale retelling possesses the following characteristics:

- Features a female focalizer/protagonist that is not a damsel in distress but an adventurer.
- Presents the protagonist as a strong, brave, witty—in general, "not feminine"—character.
- Creates a world where sexism and oppression either do not exist or are not threats to the protagonist.

To explain Parsons' study further, she uses *Mechanica*, a retold "Cinderella" by Betsy Cornwell, as an example to point out how such a story, where the female protagonist is independent and has and tries to achieve her own dream, convey a healthier feminist message than the original tale's message, "marry a prince and you will be happily ever after," does. Instead, Parsons says, *Mechanica* tells us that women, instead of waiting for a man to save and bring them happiness, can be independent, professional, and the heroines of their stories.

On the other hand, Santiago compares a retold version of "Snow White," whose title is *Blood and Snow*, by RaShelle Workman, to the original tale and explains

how retellings of and feminism in children's literature are essential. Santiago argues that as *Blood and Snow* features a female protagonist that faces obstacles but never gives in, the work teaches young girls a feminist lesson about how strong they can be.

However, the problem with narrowly emphasizing strong female protagonists as a standard for feminist fairy tale retellings is that establishing such a standard implies that women must be strong and brave, which is itself as much of a stereotype as the traditional stereotype of women as weak and fearful. Restricting women to any stereotype, even a positive one, would contradict feminist theory, part of which is about allowing women to have choices.

Moreover, as I mentioned earlier, in the examples of feminist fairy tales given by Parsons and Santiago, neither sexism nor oppression exists or creates problems for the female protagonists. Parsons's summary about *Mechanica* says that the female protagonist's mother educates her in an unconventional way—she has her study subjects such as engineering and theoretical physics, which are not considered things that women study. However, the female protagonist does not have any problems with societal expectations because her mother does not, either. While this idea, on the surface, seems to be feminist, it is not healthy for young readers to mistake this for the reality and think that such issues are easy to overcome or ignore.

Blood and Snow, likewise, does not touch upon sexism and oppression. According to Santiago, the story simply focuses on "a young girl stuck in a moral dilemma of finding herself and going against what others want of her" (83). While

the story is much more female-empowering as the female protagonist are smarter, braver, and more independent than the one in "Snow White," it ignores the other issues in feminism.

What I am trying to say is that, although it is nice that we now see fairy tales that do not have stereotypes and empower the female characters, only paying attention to the type of feminist retellings that scholars praise can provide young readers a limited feminist perspective.

Therefore, I believe the previous studies on feminist retellings that argue that featuring a strong female protagonist not bothered by stereotypes make a fairy tale retelling feminist have adopted too limited an approach. Satirical feminism, in contrast, is a technique that few papers on fairy tale retellings examine but that is helpful in producing more diverse fairy tale retellings.

III. Satirical Feminism Theory

In addition to many feminist retellings beyond the narrow confine of retellings with strong but unoppressed heroines, satirical feminism can make feminist stories more fun to read. This is because of its nature as satire. According to George Test, satire has four basic elements: aggression, play, laughter, and judgement. Combining such dynamic elements with feminism, which usually is a rather serious topic, satirical feminist works usually read less stiffy than regular feminist works.

However, in order to understand how satire works, according to Susan G. Fellows, it is essential to distinguish satiric from comic (55–6). Fellows brings up an example of how Jane Austen is not merely being witty and funny but is being satirical because of "the subversive and *aggressive* qualities that inhere in the creation and reception of satire" (56). In other words, a satirical feminist does not use satire to simply be humorous. Although one is still joking, one is also being aggressive enough to point out the issues, while maintaining less of a stiff formula when compared to directly addressing the issues.

Likewise, as Gloria Kaufman says, satirical feminism is not done solely for entertainment but also to point out the sexism in today's world and to inspire change (*In Stitches* viii). Furthermore, Kaufman points out that as "[f]eminism is committed to the idea that knowledge and understanding themselves convey strength," satirical feminism "celebrates modes of power quite different from masculine societal norms" (*In Stitches* ix). To be more specific, Kaufman explains that feminists convey strength through knowledge and understanding themselves, and they believe these weapons are far more powerful than guns and force—the masculine societal norm (*In Stitches* ix).

In addition, satirical feminism not only allows readers to understand how urgent and severe the social issues are, but it also allows writers to talk about sensitive, feminist issues more openly. According to Maria Amor Barros-del Rio, this is how James Finn Garner is able to directly explore issues related to feminism such as abused women, internalized misogyny, and men's beastly instincts in his

"Cinderella" published in *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* (Cinderella). In other words, due to satire's not-so-seriousness, writers can find it less awkward when directly addressing sensitive issues. For instance, when the prince in Garner's "Cinderella" first lays his eyes on Cinderella, he thinks to himself that she "is a wommon that [he] could make [his] princess and impregnate with the progeny of [their] perfect genes, and thus make [himself] the envy of every other prince for miles around. And she's blond, too!" (41). As uncomfortable as the content of this may make a woman feel, Garner writes the prince's thoughts in a mockery way, where the prince is presented as someone not-so-bright, implying that men like him who disrespect women are not smart and allowing readers—especially the female ones—to laugh at this matter, too.

However, due to the nature of satire, it is extremely important for readers to read between the lines, see what the authors are advocating for, and understand what their real intentions are. Otherwise, the person might mistake satirical feminism for an angry, sexist rant. Fortunately, according to Melanie Glenwright and Penny M. Pexman, children start to understand sarcasm and irony by six, and they start to distinguish the intentions by ten. Therefore, the target readers of *Castle in the Air* can understand its satire and real intention.

In conclusion, satirical feminism can be a strong tool when discussing sensitive feminist issues. However, because using satirical feminism to address issues is not direct, it is important that writers understand the type of humor that will actually appeal to their target readers, rather than leading the readers to mistake the

work as something angry and serious. When satire is used correctly, it allows readers to be more objective compared to when the author is simply being aggressive towards the sensitive topics, as the readers would not be too caught up in rage because of the author's angry, serious tone.

IV. Satirical Feminist Fairy Tale Retelling—*Castle in the Air*

Castle in the Air applies the elements of satire such as judgement and aggression to criticize gender stereotypes. Jones uses exaggeration and situational irony to mainly mock Abdullah—the unreliable male protagonist. In addition, by contrasting how he is sexist to his being unreliable and possessing traits that stereotypically belong to women, the author pokes fun at the gender roles and stereotypes that some people believe in.

In addition to being the unreliable male protagonist, Abdullah is also the focalizer of the novel. Therefore, we hear the story from his point of view and directly see his sometimes disturbing sexist remarks and behaviors. However, *Castle in the Air* remains a good example of satirical feminist fairy tale retellings, as there are times where readers get to laugh at Abdullah for the karma of those remarks and behaviors, too, which allows readers to approach such serious topics—sexism and feminism—less seriously.

At the same time, Jones still prepares readers for the social issues the novel deals with from the very beginning of the story. The very first time Jones mocks

Abdullah is on the eighth page of the book, the second page of the story, when she implies that Abdullah yearns to look more masculine, though he looks more stereotypically feminine. Jones tells readers how Abdullah wishes that he had beard just like his father, though all his has is "the six hairs on his upper lips" (8) that he hopes would multiply soon. By depicting him overdramatizing this small matter, Jones ridicules Abdullah.

Regarding Abdullah being sexist, throughout the novel, he forces standards onto women and criticizes them when they do not meet his standard. For instance, in Chapter 2, where he first lays his eyes on Flower-in-the-Night, the princess he ends up marrying, he immediately compares her to his "dream girl"—"he saw that her face was not quite a perfect oval as the face of his dream princess should have been, nor were her huge dark eyes at all misty" (22). These thoughts are sexist because he is comparing two unique individuals based on their looks, which they are naturally born with, and objectifying them instead of treating them as equal human beings. As ridiculous as it is, Jones directly tells the readers Abdullah's thoughts, which, to some extent, reflects the reality, and readers are reminded how problematic it is to behave like this.

Moreover, there are a few sexist comments he makes toward other minor female characters. For instance, when Lettie, Sophie's sister, is worried about Sophie, Abdullah says to himself, "Lettie was one of those ladies who look lovelier the more distraught they get." This idea is sexist because Abdullah is romanticizing the idea of women being "distraught," which implies that they are weak and helpless, and

saying that, not just Lettie, but some women are lovelier that way. Similar to how James Finn Garner has the prince in his "Cinderella" voice out disturbing, sexist thoughts, Jones also have Abdullah, the unreliable and "unmasculine" male protagonist, openly fetishize helpless women because of his lack and yearning for masculinity, which shows him not as an offensive character, but as a pitiful one.

In contrast, things get interesting and ironic when Abdullah himself becomes the distraught one. In addition, before that, Jones further has Abdullah narrate his thought that only makes him look more of a ridiculous character when he needs help—in Chapter 16, Abdullah is displeased with Sophie when they have conversation for the first time[1] because she "struck him as uncomfortably strong-minded for a young woman" (260). These two gender stereotypes that he believes in later build up situational irony when, in a scene, Abdullah realizes that he, in fact, can sometimes need help from the women he deems helpless, or at least should be helpless, too. In this scene, Abdullah is trapped in a house with Sophie and Lettie, as the landlord tells the constables that he believes they are the people they are looking for, desperate and helpless, he says:

> "There is general disaster, most bewitching pair of women!" he gasped to Sophie and Lettie. "The landlord—a perfidious publican—is bringing constables to arrest myself and the soldier. Now what can we do?"

[1] For anyone who is interested, Sophie was a cat up until Chapter 16. Abdullah knew her as a cat, but this was the first time they had a conversation "in person."

> It was time for a strong-minded woman to take charge. Abdullah was quite glad that Sophie was one. She acted at once. She shut the door and shot its bolt. (274–75)

While Abdullah thinks some women look lovelier when they are distraught, the distraught Abdullah only looks ridiculous, as he needs to seek help from the woman whom he dislikes because of how strong she is. Through this ironic contrast, Jones pokes fun at men who believe women should be weak and that men should be in control and shows how those men would sometimes need women to take charge, too. On the other hand, readers can see people like him in a different light and understand how ridiculous and not worthy of our time they are.

In addition, Jones uses the female characters' limited knowledge due to the patriarchy society to laugh at male stereotypical physical traits that some men are proud of possessing. When Flower-in-the-Night first meets Abdullah, she mistakes him as a girl because he does not look like a stereotypical man that her father describes and shows to her:

> "You can't be a man. You're quite the wrong shape. Men are twice as thick as you all over, and their stomachs come out in a fat bit that's called a belly. And they have gray hair all over their faces and nothing but shiny skin on their heads. You've got hair on your head like me and almost none on your face." (23)

As the father of Flower-in-the-Night does not allow her to go out or meet any men besides himself, she comes to the conclusion that all men look the same, and the

physical traits men possess do not make them attractive. Through this passage, Jones not only points out how the limited knowledge and education offer for women are harmful for them, but she also pokes fun at the "masculine" appearance that some men are proud of when it is, in fact, not attractive at all.

It is also worth noting that Abdullah gets defensive when Flower-in-the-Night mentions that he has no mustache or beard and "[puts] his hand rather indignantly to the six hairs on his upper lip" (23). Jones depicts Abdullah in this scene to be ridiculous, as when Flower-in-the-Night is telling how she believes every man possess the same physical traits, which is quite sexist, his reaction is not to point out how wrong the gender stereotypes are but to defend his almost non-existent masculine symbol.

Lastly, despite Abdullah's yearning for masculinity, Jones portrays him as a character that also possess stereotypically female traits. For instance, most male characters, especially for Abdullah, speak unnecessarily flowery language. This way of communication, according to Catherine Aponte, is stereotypically feminine. Moreover, some other stereotypical ideas about how men and women communicate that Aponte mentions are as follows:

- Women talk more than men.
- Men talk to get things done; women talk to make emotional connection.
- Men use language to inform, preserve independence and compete to maintain status, while women use language to enhance cooperation, reflecting their preference for equality and harmony. (Aponte)

In other words, Aponte observes that the general stereotypical ideas about how different genders communicate are that women tend to use more unnecessary words, in terms of sharing information, in a conversation. In addition, Aponte further tries to prove that these stereotypical ideas are wrong using scientific and psychological theories. Jones, however, portrays her characters in the opposite way and uses satirical feminism to show that they are wrong.

In *Castle in the Air*, it is the male characters who talk more and use unnecessary words when communicating. When Abdullah is talking to a merchant who is trying to sell him a magic carpet, their dialogue looks like this:

> "That is so, O king of the desert. You wish to trade with this miserable merchant?"
>
> "Not trade—sell, O master of a stack of mats." (8)

In this exchange of words, both men use unnecessary words that are neither informative nor helping get things done, despite the stereotypical ideas that people believe in are that women are the ones who do this.

Moreover, not only do readers see how ridiculous this way of talking is, but even another male character pokes fun at such flowery language when Abdullah decides to be "realistic" and stop using it: "Where's all the talk about jewels and flowers and so forth?" (207). The irony for Abdullah to look down on women yet is not as manly as he wishes he was to a point where even another man laughs at him is Jones's use of satirical feminism to ridicule him and the nonsensical gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, it is especially interesting when is communicating with a female character because the gender stereotypes are reversed. For instance, when Flower-in-the-Night finds Abdullah in her garden in the middle of the night, she asks, "Are you a new kind of servant?" (22), to which Abdullah responds, "No, masterpiece of my imagination." By having a male character speaking flowery language and a female character using straightforward language, Jones reverses and ridicules the gender stereotypes about how men and women communicate.

Compared to directly pointing out how it is wrong for Abdullah to be sexist, Jones's using satire—more specifically, exaggeration and situational irony—to convey feminist ideas allows readers to mock Abdullah and see men like him in a different light. Instead of feeling angry and being negatively impacted by people like Abdullah, readers learn how to not take those people seriously. In addition, male readers get to see how ridiculous some sexist ideas are, while female readers can see people who are sexist from a different light and laugh at them. Furthermore, with a few characters using satire to attack Abdullah and gender stereotypes, readers may even find feminism to be humorous instead of aggressive.

V. The Impact of *Castle in the Air* on Readers, Feminist Retellings, and Feminism

Due to the stereotyped plots and dialogues that appear in *Castle in the Air*, especially in the early chapters, readers may find the novel difficult to read and

mistake it as a problematic text. However, after close analysis, the novel appears to be using satirical feminism to joke about the different stereotypes and prejudices that many women still have to deal with to this date.

Readers may start reading the novel assuming that the plots are made-up and that the problems are fictional, but they later see the author's true intention, which is to point out the urgency of the present gender stereotypes and sexism. Seeing the ridiculous male characters' attitudes toward women and the two types of female characters that we are familiar with in literature, readers get to question whether what we have come to accept is, in fact, acceptable and unproblematic.

In addition, for many readers today who either are not interested in feminism or avoid feminist literature on purpose because of the negative and overly aggressive image that feminism and feminists sometimes have, this novel is not as difficult to consume. On the contrary, those readers may even find feminism humorous.

In conclusion, I believe using satirical feminism to produce a more varied feminist fairy tale retellings will be beneficial for the young readers, feminist retellings, and even the image of feminism.

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