PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN'S ROLES IN ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN FAIRY TALES

Oxana BALANIUC,

masterandă, anul II, Facultatea de Litere, Universitatea de Stat din Moldova

CZU: 821-34.09:396=111=161.1 E-mail: balanyuk.02@mail.ru

Prezentul articol analizează modul în care sunt reprezentate personajele feminine în poveștile engleze și ruse, punând accent pe construcția rolurilor de gen prin intermediul narațiunii, simbolismului cultural, funcțiilor narative și procesului de traducere. Studiul evidențiază diferențele dintre cele două tradiții narative și subliniază importanța poveștilor în reflectarea identității feminine, a valorilor culturale, a stereotipurilor sociale și a modului în care acestea modelează percepțiile despre femeie în discursul contemporan.

Fairy tales are an integral part of cultural heritage. As one of the earliest forms of storytelling, they shape perceptions of femininity and masculinity and reflect social models of behaviour and gender roles. The representation of women in fairy tales provides valuable insight into how societies conceptualise female ideals, expectations and cultural norms.

This article explores how female characters are portrayed in the Russian and English fairy tales, based on a corpus of twelve stories (seven Russian and five English) and their translations. It investigates the construction of femininity, the degree of empowerment or disempowerment of female figures and the influence of cultural frameworks and translation on these portrayals.

Research in gender and folklore demonstrates that fairy tales play a significant role in transmitting social norms from an early age. Both Russian and English tales encode gender roles differently. Russian heroines such as Vasilisa the Beautiful are praised for obedience and wisdom, while English heroines are valued for beauty and diligence [6, p. 127; 4, p. 35]. In contrast, male characters are consistently portrayed as bold and decisive [9, p. 120]. As many scholars note, fairy tales often reinforce a binary vision: men act while women endure [2, p. 122].

Passive female roles dominate many tales, particularly in traditional plots. In *Morozko* or *Little Havroshechka*, compliant heroines are rewarded with marriage, whereas assertive or disobedient women face punishment [6, p. 113; 120]. English fairy tales such as *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* similarly promote patience and silence, where male figures ultimately determine the outcome [3, p. 3; 2, p. 23]. Female agency is frequently transferred to magical helpers. Despite this, both traditions offer alternative women portrayals. In Russian traditions, characters like Marya

Morevna and Sineglazka demonstrate bravery and initiative [6, p. 300; 5, p. 186]. English tales also include clever and brave heroines, such as Molly Whuppie and Mary from *The Dauntless Girl*, who outwit male adversaries [4, p. 80; 1, p. 182]. Though their power is often mediated by external forces, these heroines challenge traditional expectations.

Russian fairy tales develop a more structured typology of female roles rooted in mythopoetic thinking. D. A. Redikultseva connects characters to spatial and functional positions – from obedient daughters to otherworldly forest figures like Baba Yaga [8, p. 217]. Women are less often described through physical appearance; instead, names and virtues shape their narrative identity. Age plays a symbolic role, with female figures classified as children, maidens or old women. Baba Yaga embodies this symbolism as an otherworldly and contradictory figure. According to V. Y. Propp, she is both an obstacle and a guide [7, p. 36]. Her hut in the forest and snake-related imagery suggest death, rebirth and tradition of initiation, linking her to deeper archetypes of female power [10, p. 87–90].

By contrast, English fairy tales often idealise female characters. Heroines are usually unnamed and defined by their beauty – golden hair, blue eyes, white skin – as in Rapunzel or Sleeping Beauty [3, p. 108-117]. Symbolic items like glass slippers or musical talents reinforce femininity, yet these gifts are given, not earned [3, p. 14; 109]. However, some fairy tales introduce nuanced portrayals. In The Three Heads of the Well, the kind and persistent stepdaughter is rewarded, offering a more ethical vision of womanhood [4, p. 138]. Although marriage remains the final goal, these characters gain it through wit, courage or emotional intelligence.

Translation significantly impacts how these portrayals are rendered. Russian translations of English tales often intensify moral framing, adding evaluative markers absent in the original. In The Old Witch, for instance, the English text presents the two sisters neutrally, while the Russian translation defines one as “good” and the other as “evil”. Endings are frequently romanticised in translation, shifting focus from female autonomy to societal reward. Such alterations reshape the reader’s perception of female identity and reinforce traditional values and stereotypes.

A comparative analysis of character traits – beauty, naivety, assertiveness and heroism – confirms cultural divergence. Each female character was evaluated on a scale from 0 to 4, where 0 indicated complete absence and 4 signified a dominant trait.

This scoring revealed cultural divergence: for instance, Marya Morevna scores higher in assertiveness in Russian, while English heroines tend to score higher in beauty and naivety. Russian tales favour symbolic action and independence, whereas English fairy tales emphasise restraint and idealised roles. Translators, as cultural mediators, change women portrayals according to the target audience tradition.

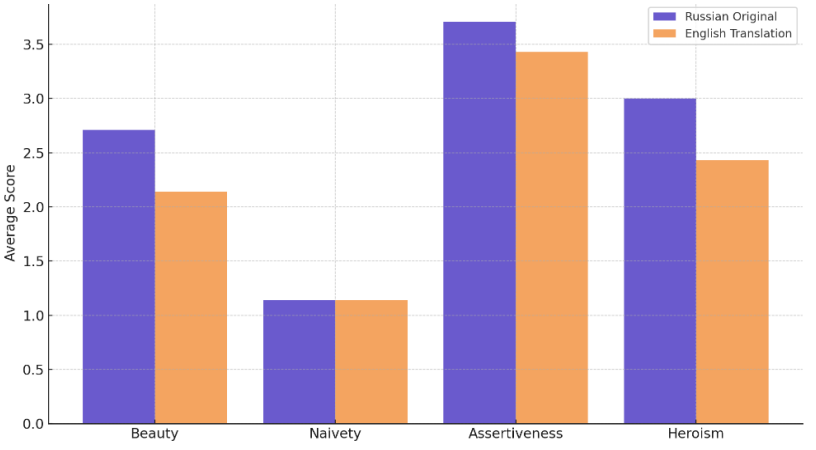


Figure 1. Average Characteristic Scores in the Russian and English Fairy Tales (Balaniuc Oxana).

In conclusion, Russian and English fairy tales offer distinct visions of womanhood. Russian narratives tend to present female characters as active, symbolic and multifaceted, often rooted in myth and traditions, while English fairy tales favour more idealised and passive heroines. Translation plays a crucial role in shaping these portrayals, either reinforcing or altering the original gender dynamics. Ultimately, fairy tales remain powerful instruments of cultural transmission, rendering the ideals, fears, aspirations and stereotypes associated with femininity in different societies.

References:

1. CROKER, T. C. *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland.* London: William Tegg, 1862. 408 p.
2. FISHER, J., SILBER, E. S. *Good and Bad Beyond Belief: Teaching Gender Lessons through Fairy Tales and Feminist Theory.* Women's Studies Quarterly. Vol. 28, No. 3/4., 2000, pp. 121-136.
3. HADAWAY, B. *Fairy Tales.* Norwich: Octopus Books Limited, 1974. – 304 p.
4. JACOBS, J. *English Fairy Tales.* The Pennsylvania State University, 2005. 169 p.
5. АЗАДОВСКИЙ М. К. (ред.) *Русская сказка: избранные мастера.* Т. 1 – Ленинград: Academia, 1931. 422 с.
6. АФАНАСЬЕВ А. Н. *Народные русские сказки В 3 т. Т. 1.* – М.: Наука, 1984. – 512 с.
7. ПРОПП В. Я. *Исторические корни волшебной сказки.* – М.: Лабиринт, 2000. – 364 с.
8. РЕДИКУЛЬЦЕВА Д. А. *Образ женщины в русских народных сказках.* – Челябинск: ЧОУВО МИДиС, 2019. с. 216-219
9. СИДОРОВА Л. А. *Лингвокультурологические особенности английской народной сказки.* Modern Humanities Success. 2023. № 1. с. 118 – 124.
10. СТЕПАНОВ Ю. С. *Баба-Яга. Константы. Словарь русской культуры. Опыт исследования.* – М.: Языки русской культуры, 1997. – 824 с.

Recommended

***Olesea BODEAN-VOZIAN**, PhD, Associate Professor*