Unveiling Roots of Villainy: A Comparative Analysis of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* and Serena Valentino's *Poor Unfortunate Soul: A Tale of the Sea Witch*

Dr Astha Parashar
Assistant Professor, Hindu Girls College, Sonepat

Abstract

When one thinks about the most famous villains in the classical fairy tales, they are only stepmothers or witches. Brothers Grimm, Anderson and Walt Disney have portrayed some of the best known stepmothers, stepsisters and ugly cruel witches. The present paper is an attempt to expose how Disney's *The Little Mermaid* confirms and establishes the justification behind this patriarchal construct through which an irreparable harm is being done to female sex solidarity by depicting women as one another's enemies. At the same time, the paper provides a comparative analysis of *Poor Unfortunate Soul: A Tale of the Sea Witch* (2016) by Serena Valentino, a modern re-rendering of the classical fairy tale, which has been a ground-breaking work in subverting the evil plan of the patriarchy.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Villainy, Witch, Female Sex Solidarity.

DOI Number: 10.14704/nq.2022.20.9.NQ44731 **Neuro Quantology 2022; 20(9):6241-6244**

In the fairy-tale land, the tussle between good and evil and the victory of the former over the latter are perennial tropes. One cannot deny the fact that evil, in visible or invisible form is prevalent in real life and children must be aware of its discernible as well as subtle forms. Fairy tales as bedtime stories are undoubtedly part of socialising process of small and young children. But the problem arises when we find that villains who personify evil are invariably females in these classical tales. Unfortunately, apart from beautiful and submissive females, the other roles fixed for women in these tales are those of witches and evildoers. Tyson suggests that patriarchy divides women into two categories: good girls and bad girls. Good girls are supposed to be "gentle, submissive, virginal, [and] angelic," and "if a woman does not accept her patriarchal gender role, then the only role left her is that of a monster" (88). These monsters, or bad girls, are considered "violent, aggressive, worldly, and overly sexual" (88).

In Disney's movie adaptation of the classic tale, called *The Little Mermaid*, the character of Ursula bears the repulsion of everyone who knows about her. However, throughout the movie, she is not given any chance to explain the reasons behind her monstrosity. After watching the movie, one reaches to the conclusion that her expulsion from Triton's kingdom is the real reason. When Triton is begging her to set free her daughter, the fire of revenge is so intense in her that she offers him to be her slave in exchange of his daughter's life which Triton accepts. She wants to make Triton feel the trauma of being ostracised. But ultimately, she is portrayed in such a way that the audience find her insane for power. This is how the entire scene takes place:

Ursula: Of course, I always was a girl with an eye for a bargain…I might be willing to make an exchange for someone even better.

(King Triton signs the deal with his trident. He changes into the form of Ursula's slaves.)

Ursula: (takes the crown in her hands) –At last…it's mine…

Ursula: You pitiful, insignificant fools! Now I am the ruler of all the ocean! The waves obey my every whim! (*The Little Mermaid* 1:10:50-1:13:14)

In Serena Valentino's *Poor Unfortunate Soul: A Tale of the Sea Witch*, the sister witches are in a terrible agony as their beloved little sister Circe loathes them for their foul meddling and has left

them forever and they feel Circe's magic is strong enough to hide her from them till eternity. This is what had exactly happened between Circe and the sister witches as Pflanze's thoughts reveal. Circe was in love with a human Prince who dumped her and broke her heart terribly. In order to take revenge upon the Prince for playing with their little sister's emotions, the sister witches used their witchcraft and turned him so mad with greed for power that he destroyed innumerable kingdoms. This was how they took revenge upon entire humanity. Circe had such a beautiful heart that she couldn't bear such massive destruction just for the sake of revenge and left her sisters with hate in her eyes, anger in her words, and an immense grief in her heart. An emotionally weak person is vulnerable to be manipulated and manoeuvred by others. Ursula takes undue advantage of the sister witches' deep pain of losing their beloved sister, Circe. They repeat the same mistake in agreeing to kill Triton in return of Ursula's help to find their sister:

They would happily risk their lives to destroy the sea god Triton if it meant they could see her again. They would destroy anything. And with stakes like those, they knew it wouldn't be too difficult to muster their hate. (Valentino 28)

The Prologue to the novel has given a horrifying description of nightmarish ruination Ursula causes to the abandoned town of Ipswich and her devilish treatment of its inhabitants. Ursula looks highly repulsive to the readers as they go through the following excerpt from the text where insensitive Ursula through her magic turns villagers begging for forgiveness into loathsome sea creatures. With this spell the humans fall to the ground, convulsing, gasping and struggling for air as they are transforming into horrific sea creatures. This scene is far more rewarding than Ursula has imagined as she listens their silent screams. How monstrous and vile she sounds when she wickedly tells them:

"Don't fight it, my darlings!" She laughed. "Or perhaps you should! It hurts more to struggle!" (Valentino 5)

She stands within the ruined landscape and sadistically enjoying the spectacle; her eyes are not only brimming with revenge but they are mournful also. Her side of story gets disclosed when she speaks up her heart before the sister witches when the latter ask her to provide them a solid reason for why they should assist her in killing Triton. The story told by Ursula is so heart rending that her monstrous ways get justified to a great extent. She had been the daughter of the sea king. She got somehow lost in her childhood in human form and was rescued by a villager from the village of Ipswich. He became her father and loved and cared her as his own daughter and she too was happy with him. He was the only person in the world who truly loved her. With the passage of time, Ursula started showing signs of being other than human. She was just a girl to understand what kind of strange power is developing inside her. The villagers were so unwise that they started taking her as a witch. The sea kept on calling her to accept it as her world but she tried her best to control herself. But one foggy morning, she could no longer resist the urge and she jumped into the sea taking her original monstrous form. She was dragged by them to be burnt at the pyre for being a witch just on the basis of her looks. As she had been with them since childhood, they could have been considerate enough to empathise with her for the trauma she suffered. When her father tried to save her, they hit him brutally and tore his body apart. Though he succeeded in helping Ursula escape but at the cost of his life. Ursula's only loved one in the entire world was brutally murdered by the villagers of Ipswich. This was the reason behind her ferocious revenge against them:

"My father drove most of them off with his harpoon, threatening to kill them if they didn't let me go, but soon there were too many…"

She was quiet again, clearly caught in the nightmare from her past.

"They ripped him to shreds, my father, trying to get at me. Trying to put me back on the pyre. He put himself between us, giving me the chance to escape, and I did, into Triton's realm." (Valentino 35)

Her painful journey continued even after that. Until she blighted the town of Ipswich in anger, her brother Triton didn't make himself known to her. He came not because he loved her and had been searching for his lost beloved sister. He sought her and brought her to the kingdom of their father so as to prove her unworthy to take the throne. He feared her power. He deliberately refrained from giving any responsibilities to her so as to prove her worthlessness and incompetency to rule the sea empire:

"Triton cast me aside because he feared my power!" Ursula said. "He said he was appalled by what I did to Ipswich, but truly I think he was afraid I would do the same to his kingdom and take it by force!"(Valentino 39)

Ultimately, her agony and revenge blind her so much that in order to ruin Triton, she decides to ruin Ariel, his youngest daughter who was not even born when Ursula bore all her tragedy:

"And now, instead, I shall take his kingdom, *my kingdom*, by force and destroy anyone who stands in my way! He could have been my brother, my family, but that time has passed! Damn him to Hades for what he's done. Damn him to nothingness!"

…

"We will ruin his daughter." She laughed. (Valentino 40-41)

The sister witches doubt their actions to help Ursula only on the basis of the latter's side of story. In order to be sure, they revisit Ursula's last encounter with her brother Triton in their magic mirror. In it, they see that Ursula was deeply pained after being ostracised from her parents' kingdom by her own brother who had painted her as a creature capable of only evil and wrongdoing in everyone's eyes. However, she was trying to be happy in her own waters. Ursula had been on good terms with Princess Tulip's father. When she tried to commit suicide after being heart- broken by jumping into the Unprotected Waters, Ursula saved her life. That was not liked by Triton who hated humans overall and especially the kingdom of King Morningstar whose fisherman had killed a number of Triton's merfolk. He warned Ursula not to help a human again. When she refuted, he got personal in his attack and took a dig at the murder of her human father who had been the only person in her life to love her unconditionally. When he took a dig at her looks, Ursula retaliated saying that it was he who had made her look repulsive in everyone's eyes. Triton couldn't bear the harsh truth and divulged the secret grudge he had for Ursula since their childhood and how he abandoned her when she was just a little child. The reason he gave was her beastly looks. In fact the personal becomes political when he played power games to get rid of the sharer of their parents' kingdom, their daughter Ursula. His ruthless conversation with Ursula is as follows:

"You heard me! You were a vile little thing. I left you adrift because I foresaw the monster you would become!"

"I wasn't lost as you said? You left me?"

"Yes, and clearly it was the right choice. Look at you. You're disgusting. Shameful." (Valentino 114)

This betrayal was more than she could comprehend. Her mind whirled at the notion of a young Triton abandoning his little sister to the perilous waves. What was much more frightening to her was the thought that her parents never tried to find her and blindly believed their son's story. She was shaken by the thought that her parents might be involved with Triton in his conspiracy. She was emotionally undone. Triton's misdeeds left her with no choice but to take her revenge upon him anyhow:

She was done.

There was no love left for her brother. There was no doubt. And he had given her no choice. No choice at all. This foul, ugly, murdering creature was going to do what she did best. She was going to take her revenge. (Valentino 115-116)

When the final day of her revenge comes, she strikes a deal with Triton to be her slave if he wants to save his lovely daughter. Triton finally realises his mistake in hurting the emotions of her sister who has been struggling with a strange kind of power since her childhood. In spite of helping her, he abandons her. He wants no competitor for his father's throne. He wants that she should die. It is not Ursula's fate but he who has made her wicked:

...This was her vengeance, and part of him felt he deserved it… Ursula's words rang in his ears as he signed the contract: *If I am this foul creature you describe, it's by your design!* Ursula had been right when she said that. He had created this monster and there was nothing he could do to amend it. His regret would mean nothing to her. His words would be like ashes. (Valentino 175)

One can safely conclude with the observation that Disney's *The Little Mermaid* has almost indiscriminately and uniformly carried forward the tradition of its predecessors of using the prop of making women villains of their plots. However, the modern retelling of the classical fairy tale namely, Serena Valentino's *Poor Unfortunate Soul: A Tale of the Sea Witch* succeeds to a great

extent in shedding the stereotypical labelling of women as having natural evil propensities by finding justifications, psychological, moral or social behind the crookedness, depravity and wickedness of Ursula.

WORKS CITED

The Little Mermaid. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, Walt Disney Pictures, 17 Nov. 1989.

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. Routledge, 2006.

Valentino, Serena. *Poor Unfortunate Soul: A Tale of the Sea Witch*. Disney Press, 2016.