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Re-Imagining the Fairy Tale Tradition in Bill Willingham's *Fables*

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Abstract:

This paper attempts a study on the recreation, and to an extent, the subversion of Fairy tale tradition in Bill Willingham's graphic narrative *Fables*, which grant space and time for detailing the epic adventures of fairy tale characters in the contemporary world. *Fables*, one of the most popular DC Vertigo publications, provide eye -feasting cinematic and sequential continuity, so that the readers are more or less drawn towards the conceptions of its creators. The paper, therefore, aims to view how the visual and the virtual gain more prominence over the symbolic and the metaphoric in such Graphic representations.

Keywords: Folklore, Fairy Tale, Postmodernism, Representation, Cultural memory, Comics/ Graphic Narratives.

Introduction

The status quotient of Fairy tales were always determined by its popularity among the younger generations since middle ages, and hence are often referred to as "children's literature" or even as "Literature of the childhood". However as Jack Zipes observes, fairy tales cannot be viewed "one-dimensionally"(28). As a transitional genre, it bears traces of orality, folkloric tradition, and socio-cultural performance. Comics, on the other hand, were always associated with the popular culture, providing amusement and enjoyment. They were not preferred in libraries, since a collection of "images and comments" were not considered as "real books" and nobody with any intellectual sense would read them. The evolution of graphic narratives from caricature to comic strips to comic series and finally graphic narratives were nevertheless met

with considerable reception. Recent studies place them in the nexus of the culture. Therefore Karin Kukkonen and Gideon Haberkorn states that

“Comics are cultural artifacts and physical entities—they are created, produced, manufactured, and consumed.” (239).

The fairy tale became fully institutionalized by the beginning of the Twentieth century and led to the flourishing of the genre in the literary arena. Graphic narratives, due to its vagrant origins, had to wait a decade more to be accepted as a complex discourse with interstices between its images and its works.

Postmodern fairy tales subvert and challenge the traditional conventions of the genre, thus creating independent, unconventional heroines, attractive and ideology driven witches and deprived princes. Such reconstructions were a favourite motif of writers since the Romantic period, especially in the works of feminist writers who sought to seek gender and sexual autonomy by obliterating the accepted conventions of the mainstream society.

Therefore, the interweaving of folklore into the genre of comic writing in the postmodern era further provides radical platform for revocation. Bill Willingham's *Fables* is one such reworking in comics, which offers a characterization of subverted hierarchical values and casts fairy tales characters as inhabitants of the contemporary American society, with its own challenges and politics. The storyline develops as fairy tale characters, with their pasts intact, strive to survive in capitalist world.

The Labyrinthine World of *Fables*.

Was it the same Prince Charming who married Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty? Was the Big Bad Wolf who tried to eat the three little Piggies the same character that ate Red Riding Hood's Grannie? Could people really talk to animals back then? If Lewis Carroll could create Alice and drop her in Wonderland and C. S. Lewis send five children to a parallel world, Narnia, like J. M. Barrie sent three to Neverland with an immortal young boy, why couldn't one create new stories with old characters? (Willingham, *Legends in Exile* 34). These questions, which vexed the curious mind of young Bill Willingham, gave rise to the New York best selling comic trade paperback series, *Fables*.

Written and created by Bill Willingham and Lan Median, *Fables* started as Fantasy series in 2005, under the DC imprint, Vertigo. It heralded narratives with fairy tale characters in contemporary American milieu and presented the continuation of their life after their fairy tale regime. Spanning over 150 issues, *Fables* entertained its readers for three years and produced many spin offs. The success of *Fables* lies in part with the conspicuous status of DC comics in the graphic world. After its final issue in 2005, the creators compiled the series into twenty two volumes, starting from the introductory volume *#1 Legends in Exile* (Issues 1-5) and ending with *#22 Farewell* (Issue 150).

Fantasy in the Urban World: *Fables* and the Alliance with the Folklore.

In an apparently gruesome murder scene large letters are drawn with sticky, dripping blood, which says “Not so happily ever after” (Willingham, *Legends in Exile*, 16). This is Rose Red's apartment and the blood is supposed to be hers, implying torture and even death. Willingham, through his topnotch graphic narrative, subverts the "taken for granted" happy endings in the fairy tales and derives inferences for alternative, “practical” finales for the characters of the fairy tales or fables in his graphic series.

Willingham introduces his immoral characters as “refugees from the land of make believe” who have been driven from story book realm by a powerful but unknown adversary and forced to blend with “gritty, mundane reality” of human life (Willingham, *Storybook Love* 1). Perhaps parodying the banality of human life when compared to the adventurous spirit of the fable characters, human beings are referred in the series as “Mundys” who are of no relevance to the fables and are at times nosy intruders. These characters, *Fables* as they are known, live in Fabletown, a fictional town in New York. The glamorous lives of the near immortals as these are mulched with ideology politics of the human world and are transmogrified from their fairy tale persona.

The world of *Fables* adheres to the concept of urban fantasy since “they bring together tropes of pastoral or heroic fantasy into the urban realm” (Irvine 200). Alexander C. Irvine also points out two fundamental strains of urban fantasy:

“those in which urban is a descriptor applied to fantasy and those in which fantasy modifies urban” (200).

Identically, in *Fables*, a cluster of fable characters in contemporary avatar seems to have inhabited a relatively commonplace area of New York City. They are centuries old, but their immortal youthfulness are sealed secret from the mundys and the fate of those who venture to dig into their identity are “silently” taken care of by them. They have a history of their own, which is independent from the folklore tradition. When the series begin, the Fables have been inhabitants of Fabletown for three hundred years. The first volume, *Legends in Exile*, begins with stock declaration, “Once upon a time...”, thus evoking the expectations of the genre schema of a traditional fairy tale. However the story takes place not in the outskirts of some faraway land but between the Ruyard and Bullfinch Street, quite an unsuspecting place for extraordinary events.

Inhabiting the bustling burghal like New York, the fairy tale characters assume such verisimilitude as they behave and dress accordingly within the frames of the particular atmosphere. Naturalization of cultural memory and its level of reference, thus, enhance the meaning making processes of the readers as they decode the generic frames of the graphic narrative. Bigby comments to Snow White on their immortality:

“One of the advantages of near immortality is that we can learn to accept and adapt to most anything- eventually.” (Willingham, *Animal Farm* 13).

The story of their exile is dictated in the middle of the first volume by the mayor King Cole during the Remembrance Day ceremony, a day for remembering their homelands. They were forced out of their homelands by an Adversary, whose identity is exposed by Boy Blue in *Volume 5: Homelands*. The first half of the *Fables* deals with the lives and adventures of the fables in the human world, whereas the second half concerns with struggles of the fables to save their homelands as well as the mundy world.

Willingham has not only reworked a genre frame of the fairy tale, but he has also inscribed narrative strategies that of other popular genres. The first volume is a murder mystery. The series begin with the appearance of crime thriller. A lone sheriff is smoking in his office, when a terrified client runs to inform about the crime: vandalism of the popular fairy tale

character, Rose Red's apartment and her disappearance. The sheriff is Bigby and he has a detached countenance of a sleuth. Like any other crime thriller, there is a self-determined, glamorous Dame, (in this case, Snow White) and a famous Parlor Room scene. Bigby remarks before he unravels the mystery,

“Anyone who's over fancied himself a detective, openly or secretly, longs for the day he can do the famous parlor room scene. It's the moment I get to reveal who did what, how they did it and most important- how I figured it all out.” (Willingham, *Legends in Exile* 98).

Willingham thus creates a pastiche of crime thriller by portraying the sleuth as a wolf with an aggressive past, since Bigby is the humanised version of the Big Bad Wolf, who threatens the Little Red Riding Hood and blows away the home of the three little pigs. However, Willingham made it a point not to involve death of a character in the first volume itself, and the mystery is revealed to be a staged murder of Rose Red, who does it to get away with certain financial commitments. There is no intradiegetic voice over or first person accounts in *Fables 1: Legends in Exile* unlike the accepted decorum of a film noir or a crime narrative, such as that of Hammock, Conan Doyle or Chandler. Bigby, is instead, a hardboiled detective, logical and deliberate in his moves. The trench coat, cigarettes, and curt rhetoric are cultural clues for a stereotypical detective, which are naturalized signs for the readers.

Is there subaltern repression in *Fables*? The second volume of *Fables*, *Animal Farm*, clearly alludes to George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). The animals and anthropomorphic beings such as giants, elves and deported convicts reside in Upstate New York, secluded and guarded from the mundys by "protection spells". The inhabitants of Animal Farm can be considered as the modern day subaltern community. They are a threat to the mainstream society due to their structural, physical and cultural specificities, and hence are secluded, in hegemonic manner to the farm, in the guise of security reasons. Therefore the second volume, in fact, follows the genre decorum of an espionage thriller and is a critique on dictatorship, an allegory of Stalin-era Soviet Union. The revolution is initiated, like in the Orwell novel, by pigs, in the guise of addressing grievances of the inhabitants and aiming for freedom from the "dominant" order. However, their gradual association with humans (Here, Goldilocks and her three bears) results in tyranny and ugly plots. "Let bureaucracies thrive," Dan, the pig cries out in anger

during their revolutionary march, "and they will take care of the never-ending task of deadening personal freedom" (Willingham, *Animal Farm* 94).

Volume 4: Homelands initiates fables at war towards liberating their homelands from the adversary, who is revealed as Gepetto, the creator of Pinocchio and the numerous other creatures. *Homelands* follow the genre schemata of a heroic drama or a war fiction with Boy Blue as the unconventional hero. Willingham has borrowed heroic legends to aid the fables as they embark to combat the adversary. These defenders such as Robin Hood and his merry men, Redcrosse knight (from Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*), King Pellimore (from Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*), Hermon von Starkenfaust (from Washington Irving's shortstory "The Spectre Bridegroom"), and Tim Lan (the fairy knight in many of the English ballads), however, lose their life in the battle with the Adversary. This gives rise to the idiosyncratic charlatans such as Boy Blue, Prince Charming and Frog Prince who lack the direct social dimension of a war hero. Though Frog Prince and Boy Blue do not conform to the traditional characterization of a hero, they are guided by an ancestral exemplar. For instance, Boy Blue is appointed as the aide-de-camp to Colonel Bearskin, the commander of the defenders and the Flycatcher/ the Frog Prince, seeks advice from Lancelot. The conversion of these fairy tale characters into war heroes is inspired on Arthurian legends.

In *Volume 5: Mean Seasons*, Willingham manages to balance the metamorphosis of the fairy tale genre with a secondary genre frame, of the war and horror genre. Bigby is the main protagonist and the graphic frame takes the readers to the atmosphere of World War II, much away from the fairy tale world. It does not picture the Holocaust scenery although there are explicit framing of plotting Nazi officers and unethical surgeons, and their experimentations with bodies to create Frankenstein monsters to fight the enemies and the vulnerable. Their tables are turned when Bigby infiltrates the secret office and sabotages these strategically important military assets of Germans. The Nazi army was, however, armed for any consequences or drawbacks. When Bigby is captured, a female Nazi scientist postulates to create an army of wolf soldiers through the serum of Bigby's lycanthropic claret. The unethical missions of Nazi scientists such as the reassembling of the Frankenstein monster and plotting a battalion of wolf soldiers, is ridiculously exaggerated and entirely repudiate the reader's expectations of a war and

horror genre. Willingham furthers it through Bigby's discovery decades later, of a new species, the werewolves, formed from his blood.

Interestingly, in *The Great Fables Crossover*, the thirteenth *Fables* installation, Fabletown is threatened to extinction by Kevin Thorne, a metafictional villain-writer aiming to rewrite the universe. He is supposedly the son of Gary, the incarnation of the powerful literary device, Pathetic Fallacy. In the particular volume, Willingham introduces “the Genres” as characters who are evoked by Kevin Thorne. The genres are compelled to pitch in ideas so that Thorne can create an apocalyptic world out of his imagination. The Western genre sports a cowboy hat and bandanna and spurs, the Blockbuster has a Rambo like countenance, the Mystery is as mysterious as can be, and the Horror genre has the persona of a seemingly innocent girl with huge, doleful eyes. The science fiction and Fantasy are considered to be twins, the Literature, proud and “still looking down her nose” on others and the comedy has the “same old material.” Their dialogues betray their characteristics. For instance, Literature is concerned with a world

“in which the Marxian dialectic and the post- feminist discourse in which the metanarrative creates an aesthetically mediated experience of transcendence that obviates phallogocentric, masculinist logocentrism...” (Willingham, *The Great Fables Crossover* 66).

Likewise, *Fables* poses a kind of textual ventriloquism, borrowing core elements from the tales of magic so that their past pervades into their postmodern recreation, meanwhile taking pains in transforming them to fit suitable contemporary roles.

History Repeats; History Continues

Though the countenance, mannerisms and attitudes of the characters are suited to fit the contemporaneity and their position in Fabletown, there is, however, a distinctive continuity with the traditional incarnations of the character. Bigby, whom Willingham chose to participate in most of the issues, is a largely flawed individual. Archetypically, he is an iconic killer. He, like the beast (of Beauty and the Beast fame) has not ridden himself from his “beastly” countenance and is always threatened to go back to his cursed visage, if provoked. They are in part, the representation of the two natures of human beings: the humane and the animal. Deviating from

the traditional lore, Bigby is presented as the son of North wind, thus the power of blowing things! He is also apparently one of the “original” werewolves. Willingham annotates that he sketched Bigby as a template of what America used to be, a best guy to be friends with, but the worst enemy you can find. (Willingham, *Mean Seasons*, 30).

The story of Snow White and Rose Red is a forking continuation from two Grimms' tales, namely, “Snow White and Rose Red” and “SnowWhite and the Seven Dwarves”. Jack Horner of “Jack and the Beanstalk” was and still is incapable of handling money even in his adult form in *Fables*. His adventures are always expensive, at the cost of others, and after multiple tryst with wars and women, he ends up successful in Hollywood.

Flycatcher or the Frog Prince, also known by the official name Prince Ambrose, who is notorious of having been saved by the curse through a Princess's kiss, cannot get rid of his past and is averted by the beauties due to his impeccable taste for flies and insects. He is thus, ironically, the “official” janitor of Fabletown and is trusted with odd jobs, such as cleaning up the murder scene in *Legends in Exile*. However this continuity is broken when he is granted with the ownership of the peaceful haven in the last issue.

There are many Asian and Arabian characters in *Fables*, and an entire volume, *Arabian Nights and Days* is dedicated to their exploits, Mowgli and Sinbad being prominent ones. Mowgli, the Indian fable character makes his appearance back to the town after years of “Derring-do” in the far lands, as a lanky adult in *Fables 5: Mean Seasons*, in an undercover name, Mr. Jagatbehari, a perpetual tourist. He is one of the fables exercising their contribution for their community by being agents or spies. In order to preserve his identity and stay uncaught, he goes by different names, as he justifies, “Out in the Mundy, we have to change identities every twenty years or so.” (Willingham, *Homelands*, 70). Mowgli, who has lived in both the mundane and the fable world, observes the preoccupation with aggression and ammunition. “What nature shortened for us,” he explains to Bhageera, “is made up with the manufacture of our teeth and claws”. (39: 14).

Gepetto is the cunning creator and the Adversary of the fables, and his conquests implies a tactful imperialism and the subsequent westernization of culture and practices, a common neo colonial activity in postmodern times. Willingham satirizes the political and ideological

domination prevalent in the contemporary milieu. Gepetto boasts of his accomplishments as thus: “We go through fifty year cycles of expansion and consolidation. We've just started another push of expansion. These are exciting times for the empire. Having finally absorbed the last of the European fable worlds we've just started our conquest of the Arabian worlds. Everything is moving so much faster now. We should be ready for the Asian or the African kingdoms in only another century or two.” (Willingham, *Arabian Nights (and Days)* 35). His words resonates colonial agendas and their hegemonic manipulations.

In textual discourses, the readers make use of the mimesis and create an illusion of what they see and understand from it. This decoding is more authentic and successful in comics, since the images are generally iconic and direct. *Fables* have generated iconography for each of the fairy tale characters and their illustrations substantiate a successful meaning process. Iconographic markers assist the naturalization of the characters by identifying them with their older versions. For instance, Snow Queen's first appearance in *Fables* resembles closely with the icon of Snow Queen as illustrated by H.F. Ford in Andrew Lang's *The Pink Fairy Book* (83).

Similarly, when Cinderella is introduced in the first issue, she is seen sword fighting with Blue beard, the villainous fairy tale character known to have brutally murdered his numerous wives. Except for the blond hair and petite figure, the woman is not recognizable as the cinder girl-turned queen. The iconography of a shoe in her attire is what distinguishes her as a fairy tale. In the *Fable* world, she runs a silver shoe boutique and in the later issues, appears as a spy. Bluebeard meanwhile claims to have forsaken his lecherous past and is one of the richest men in the town. Likewise, Flycatcher or the Frog Prince is recognized by the frog shaped cap. Red accentuates the appearance of Rose Red and Little Red Riding Hood.

Happy marriages are, however, not discounted in *Fables* as proved by the martial union of Bigby and Snow White and the Beauty and the Beast. The two couples are similar in the sense that, the phallus is a humanoid, or a lycanthrope and the feminine is a previously celebrated beauty. Both union results in progeny, seven miscellaneous cubs for the former and a "bestly beauty" for the latter. Willingham implies the future of the *Fables* in these cubs, who personifies the humane as well as the animal nature. On the other side, adding blues to the trope of happy endings is the trend of Boy Blue, whose first love with Red Riding Hood ends fatally with her

death. He is, though, a continuous seeker of romance and sets up the potentiality of happy ending as something promising and enlivening.

Fables and the human world

Fabletown and mundane society are in quite a comprising situation when the *Legends in Exile* starts. The Mundys are in no way affected by Rose Red's apparent murder, though she has had many human punks as company. They are spared when the revolutionary army in the Farm plans attack. However by the third installment, Willingham points out that human have an unavoidable role in the lives of fables. Humans appear as comrades in "Bag O' Bones", which features Jack O' Fables taking part in "War of Yankee Aggression" which is, the American Civil war, where he takes part in the war quite unfaithfully, cheats an old African of his magic sack, seduces a noble lady, captures death itself which results in a big hullabaloo. The dark reaper is however grateful to Jack for "granting" him a day off! However his success is soon lost, when his new sweetheart runs away with the magic sack. Here, the fable is cheated back by a mundy.

Bigby takes part in World War II and contributes his share by brutally assassinating the plotting Nazi army. Hitler appears spear heading methods for victory, and creating "Frankenstein monsters" from dead people. Bigby results in fathering an eclectic species, the werewolf. *Werewolves of Heartland*, a *Fable* spin-off narrative, pictures his encounter with the new "tribe", who are now neither animal nor human. Alluding to the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross and the establishment of Holy Communion, the "children" and "grandchildren" of Bigby attempts to murder him in vain.

When the forces of the Adversary surpasses their capabilities, the "humane" fables are forced to retreat to the Farm, where the Mister Dark, helper of Adversary, plans his exploits on the human community and turn them into seats of his 'undead' shadows. It is thus, with the life of mundane world hanging in the balance, that the fables realize that they cannot shirk from their responsibility of saving the creators of their past. (Willingham, *Rose Red* 12).

Guilty conscience causes further tragedy among men. Willingham projects this flaw through the personification of evil conscience in Mister Dark, a sorcerer in alliance with the adversary. With the appearance of the grim reaper, he is the shadow that causes jealousy, hatred,

doubt and the most destructive of them all, guilt. He is, as Dunstar Happ admits to Bellflower (the transformed witch of old times, Frau Totenkinder),

“one of the great power” and the “darkness that can never be entirely eliminated from anyworld” (Willingham, *Rose Red*, 81).

They are killed or driven to suicide out of terror and at other times deformed into passivity. This attack of fear may imply to the influence of myth in the psychological and cultural intelligentsia of the people. Mundies or the humans, withal, is responsible for the creation and recreation of the fables and hence King North is seen to request Mister Dark to spare them:

“in this one world the many hidden facts of our lives leak out, to be told and retold by these mundys... this is a world of observation and, what? Pondering?” (Willingham, *Rose Red* 133)

Mister Dark is the incarnation of fear and uses it to attack people, especially those vulnerable. He also personifies the evils of postmodern world, most of which is constructed to demolish the fear of insecurity.

Conclusion

Willingham has given psychological depth to the fable characters so much so that their activities and intentions seem to have unconscious consequences in the “mundane” reality, just as how the traditional myths succeeded in expurgating socialization agenda in the community. The appropriation of genre decorum is another narrative strategy adopted by Willingham which subtly express the use of tradition and subversion in *Fables*. The *Fables* series are thus a transmutation of the tradition of fairy tales, as well as of the genre decorum.

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Comic book fans have been enjoying Bill Willingham's Fables for years, so it's only fit and proper that at long last readers who take their stories straight up without pictures (well, only a comparatively few pictures, at any rate) were allowed to join the fun. Peter & Max is Willingham's first Fables novel, a tale of sibling rivalry that spans several centuries and as many worlds, and like the comic books that preceded it, it weaves half a dozen familiar folktales and fairy stories into a single seamless tapestry, ringing some clever changes on them along the way. They're confined to the Farm because the most vital of all Fable laws strictly forbids anything that might reveal their magical nature to the mundys. Fairy-tale adaptations are ubiquitous in modern popular culture, but readers and scholars alike may take for granted the many voices and traditions folded into today's tales. In *Fairy Tales Transformed?: Twenty-First-Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder*, accomplished fairy-tale scholar Cristina Bacchilega traces what she terms a "fairy-tale web" of multivocal influences in modern adaptations, asking how tales have been changed by and for the early twenty-first century.