

## **An Aberration from the Ordinary-Scarcity as Seen in Grimm's *Children and the Household Tales***

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The aim of this paper is to explore and deconstruct the subtle role which food plays in Grimm's fairy tales. In these tales, frequent representations of starvation and denial can be seen. These representations are said to stem from Grimm's own personal life where he had to battle hunger pangs. Furthermore, widespread famine and poverty were also added reasons for incorporating such references in these tales. Grimm's fairy tales are not only an actual representation of society as it was, it was also a way to weave morals into tales which would guide children later on in life. These tales dealt with complex plots such as wastage, saving for later and even the lengths and extents to which starvation would drive a person. In many such tales, there is a hint of cannibalism, indicating the dire state of affairs which prevailed in the society. Not only can deconstruction unmask the role of food in these tales, it can also shed light on the lifestyle that was reflected as a mirror reflects one's reflection. There is more that meets the naked eye when it comes to these stories. Though they were intended for a younger audience, they have managed to accurately capture what drives a person, be it in the presence or acute absence of food. Not only does it serve as a temptation, it also brings forth the underlying malice within certain characters.

The importance of food is manifold-not only does it sustain life, but also enables man to carry out his everyday tasks with ease. In the absence of food, man's life becomes chaotic and he runs from pillar to post just to scarp through. People live and work for the sole purpose of each and every single day's meal. Food binds man together- important functions uniting friends and family alike are linked by food.

Food is the nexus, connecting man to the society. It can be seen that sharing of food can develop a sense of care and love among people. It can provide a transition for man to relax from the cares and worries of his life. Be it a rich business magnate or a poor roadside beggar, man's ultimate aim is to secure a day's meal.

Food symbolizes several emotions like love, comfort, as stress buster, memory, as reward or power. People turn at least once in their life to satisfy any of these feelings with food. Only for food people give up their time with family, for friends, their character etc. People spend their life

struggling to earn, isolating themselves away from their loved ones just for a day's meal and to make their life satisfactory. It all begins with food.

The need for food makes our society competitive and materialistic. They undergo lots of difficulties and pains in their working area, they accept everything for to fill their stomachs. People are found to bear lots of pain and struggle in their professional environment, all because they realize it is the only way to survive. However, this could be the reason for the old saying that one never forgets the man who served them a meal. Only the struggling understands the true value of pain, the pain of poverty. Nevertheless, it can be perceived that the acute pang of hunger is felt by the poor and hungry than the rich.

A man can bear his hunger only to a certain limit and if he finds or realize a way to satiate himself, he may do anything for it. It is evident from Grimm's Fairy Tale 'The Starving Children' published in his first edition of *Children and the Household Tales* in which the plot describes a mother who was hungry and loses her mind enough to make her choose her daughter as her meal. The tale thus brings out the reality that hunger can make man forget relationships or any sort of emotional attachments.

Hunger can turn a normal person wild making them does anything tragic or disastrous for food. In today's society, it is witnessed that several of the farmers kill themselves as they are unable to feed their family. The recent damage cause by the 'Gaja' cyclone in Tamil Nadu and Kerala floods has wreaked havoc in the lives of people. The newspapers are plagued with families ruined and the struggle to consume even a single meal. When the breadwinner of a family is affected, it results in undue burden being heaped on the shoulders of other family members.

When Grimm's father had an untimely death, a similar fate was in store for the family. They were pushed on the brink of starvation and this could have resulted in hunger and starvation being included as key themes in several of his short stories. The world has seen several of men going to war and even nations waging bloody battles killing each other for the sake of food. It can be observed that a person becomes a thief, a murderer or any other degenerate criminal element for the sole sake of hunger and starvation.

The stark example for this aspect is Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*. He is branded as a thief for stealing a mere loaf of bread to save his family from hunger. In spite of protesting, he was jailed and suffered for an extended period and languished behind bars. Likewise, the current society has witnessed the murder of Madhu, a tribal man from Kerala who was beaten to death for stealing some food. Hunger can be seen as a driving cause for most of the crimes in society.

Even the carnivorous animals are tame when they are stomach full, nevertheless they are provoked and are ferocious when hunger strikes them. Similarly, hungry people are unable to think about others. They forget themselves when they are hungry and resort to extreme measures which often lead to deadly consequences.

Should the man be blamed? Should his motive be blamed? Or should the driving psychology behind his hunger be blamed? It is still difficult to ascertain which is right or wrong when it comes to these issues and society faces a dilemma. It is frightful to see a starving child who is unaware of what is happening to it and neither can they react, however the worse sight is a starving man who has developed vampire instincts. For a hungry man, even a muddy or murky pool of water can appear as ambrosia due to his need to satiate himself.

Rakhi Chakraborty in August 2014 has mentioned in her article ‘YourStory’ that one of the deadliest famine massacres was in 1943 when three million people died due to starvation and the others resorted to eating grass and human flesh to survive and satisfy hunger. People can stoop to such extreme levels when they come face to face with hunger.

Grimm’s fairy tales abound with themes of hunger and starvation. In the story ‘The Robber Bridegroom’, the dreadfulness of cannibalism by hungry men are clearly revealed. “A band of drunken thieves drag home a young woman, force her to drink three full glasses of wine "one white, one red, one yellow," tear off her clothes, and finally, they "chopped her beautiful body into pieces, and sprinkled them with salt” (Grimm 202).

Similarly, in the tale ‘Brother and Sister’ the children, they do not even get good food a day. They worried that, “Our meals are the hard crusts of bread that are left over; and the little dog under the table is better off, for she often throws it a nice bit. May Heaven pity us.”(Grimm 67).

In ‘One Eyes, Two-eyes and Three-eyes’ the girl with the two eyes were tortured by not giving her good and enough food. She cried and cried in hunger and this can be proved through “Have I not reason to weep, when I have two eyes like other people, and my sisters and mother hate me...and give me nothing to eat but the scraps they leave? To-day they have given me so little that I am still quite hungry” (Grimm 585). Making her starve was the only way to torture the two-eyed girl. According to Grimm the worst punishment was making people to go hungry. The other two sisters waited for her with the small amount of food and they were eagerly waiting to enjoy how she was suffering from hunger.

These are only a few illustrations of Grimm’s grasp of what hunger and food can make a person do. Though food might seem as an inconsequential element in fairy tales, Grimm has

highlighted aspects of gluttony and cases where a dearth of food has resulted in calamities. Grimm has explored both aspects by weaving moralistic strains for children to abide by.

They are taught neither to be greedy nor to be lured by food, not should they waste food as there might be a time when they might face an acute shortage of food. Since these stories were aimed at moulding young minds, Grimm brothers wanted them to know at a young age that wasting food was not morally correct because there might come a time in their lives when the lack of food would intensely affect them.

At first, Grimm brothers enjoyed their rich life. They got what they wanted in life and they never realized what hunger was. But after the death of their father, it was totally upside down. Fate played in their life and they struggled to get one time meal. Some days they had to satiate themselves with a piece of dry bread.

Jacob Grimm ultimately understood how important it was for him to get a job. Starvation and poverty lead them to be more responsible in life and look out for possibilities enough to feed them. The principle thought that only a man who suffered from hunger can understand its pain is clearly explicable from the Grimm's tales. The brothers have shown a clear picture of the pain of hunger in their tales. Also, Grimm's started to collect fairy tales the time of famine where people starved to death and their hunger lead to kill each other to satisfy their stomachs. That was exactly incorporated by Grimm in most of his tales.

The subtle ways in which he incorporates elements of food, hunger and starvation are mostly to teach his young readers the value of food. He also draws in his own experiences when starvation held its firm grip on his family in the absence on the breadwinner. Extreme hunger is a recurrent theme that runs through many of Grimm's fairy tales and paralleled their own lives.

Grimm's *Children and the Household Tales*, first published in 1812, are about many things: magic and families, evilness and talking animals. But running through many of them is a brutal obsession with food. The Brothers Grimm collected stories of hunger: what horrors it will drive some people to and how sweet it feels to satisfy it. These are entirely based on their first-hand experience of appetite and its effects. Getting in close proximity with hunger and starvation, Grimm finally was able to understand the feelings of the less privileged class.

By the time they were writing their collection of folklore in the early 1800s they were depriving themselves of food to support younger siblings. At breakfast they drank a single cup of coffee. Their only meal was a dinner, three portions shared between five people. There is a voice that pops up repeatedly in Grimm. It says, 'I'll tell you a secret and you won't be hungry

anymore.' Jacob wrote of how he missed the 'order' of mealtimes at his mother's table (she died in 1808).

And almost as bad as the prospect of becoming dinner is the prospect of having no dinner at all -many of these stories are haunted by the spectre of hunger. It is famine and despair that sets the whole plot machinery of 'Hansel and Gretel' in motion. Mothers threaten to eat or abandon their own children because there is no food. Outside of the palace or noble house, people survive on a meagre diet of bread, roots and herbs with the occasional egg or apple. Step children and outcasts get dry crusts and whatever they can forage.

Maria Tatar tells, that the "the tales had their origins in a culture where famine was common, and life was nasty, brutish, and short. The young and vulnerable may have indeed felt at risk when there was nothing to eat, even if, as we know, cannibalism was a fairly rare phenomenon. She points out that adults still "express their affection with phrases like 'You're good enough to eat up.' (Richards).

But as Tatar also says, these stories remind the readers over and over again of the central importance and pleasure of food in their lives. "Often a great meal is the highest good in the fairy tale." She writes: "Yes, gold sparkles and shines, castles lure, and princesses await the transformative kiss, but there is almost nothing like a full stomach for those living in fairy-tale worlds (Richards).

There are also instances of cannibalism in Grimm's fairy tales which some might argue are too intense for young children to fathom. However, Grimm brothers wanted to portray an accurate picture of what would happen in the sheer absence of food. In 'The Juniper Tree', a wicked stepmother kills her stepson so that their daughter will inherit everything. In order to conceal the hideous crime, she chops up the little boy's body and turns him into a pot of stew.

When his father returns home, he tucks into a hearty meal. "Ah, wife, how delicious this food is, give me some more."(Grimm 223). Hunger does not think of any relationship. By including such elements of cannibalism, the lines drawn between family, friends and foes dims. These brutal and animalistic tendencies come to play when food or the lack of it comes to the forefront. By incorporating this basic human need to teach young minds a lesson, the Grimm brothers highlight features of society and its attitude towards food.

In 'Hansel and Gretel' the family is affected by poverty and the step mother finds it hard to feed her step children. Being a step-mother she thinks of eliminating the kids and uses poverty as the weapon to convince the father to send away the kids from home. This can be proved through, "Everything is eaten again, we have one half loaf left, and after that there is an end. The

children must go, we will take them farther into the wood, so that they will not find out their way out again” (Grimm 88).

However, the children out of starvation look for a way to satisfy their hunger. It was their hunger and longing for food that they got attracted to a house covered with bread and cakes assuming that they will have lot of food to eat. However their blind hunger pushed them into danger. This is seen through, “... and when they came quite up to little house, they saw that it was built of bread and covered with cakes, but that the windows were of clear sugar”. (Grimm 90)

Many historians point out that famines which plagued the nation and plunged the whole of Europe into poverty were another reason why Grimm incorporated the element of hunger in these stories. Widespread famine swept across the nation and there was acute scarcity of food. Begging, stealing and eating whatever was left were the only means of sustaining oneself during those terrible times. By including these tough situations and ghastly details in these stories, Grimm is able to keep his stories mirroring the reality of society and life during his period.

Children are made aware from a young age that famine and hunger are realities which they might have to face. Though there is a make-believe world in his tales, Grimm also wanted to portray a slice of unpleasant reality to keep the children grounded to the real world. Magic and fairies were only a means of escapism. The real world was often a harsh and demanding place where friends could turn into foes in the blink of an eye. It is often thought that a rich man’s dog is getting better food than the servant working in the same household. The disparity in the manner in which the poor and downtrodden are treated when it comes to the issue of food is a blatant reminder by Grimm’s tales of what the person have failed to realize as a society. Grimm needed to keep this thought in the minds of children and hence he incorporated these less than savoury elements.

Ultimately, these stories provide an engaging reading to both children and adults alike. Be it ‘Snow White’ being tempted to eat the poisoned apple or Hansel and Gretel gobbling up the cakes and delicacies, food continues to play an integral role in Grimm’s stories. These stories also remind oneself of the harsher realities of life – hunger, starvation, food scarcity, etc.

By including such themes for tender minds, Grimm has only helped them to grow in maturity and understanding of issues plaguing the present world. These timeless tales continue to remain classic children’s literature due to their ability to weave society’s issues relating to food and food scarcity.

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