

## A Comparison of Female Protagonists in Fairy Tales: *Cinderella and Pla Boo Thong* การเปรียบเทียบตัวละครเอกหญิงในเทพนิยายเรื่อง ซินเดอเรลลา และ ปลาบู่ทอง

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### Abstract

*This article aims to compare the similarities of the female protagonists in the fairy tale stories of Cinderella and Pla Boo Thong, both being well known and read worldwide. The Feminist theory was applied to analyze the female roles in this article. These fairy tales reflect the images of women in the past, showing that even though they were from different cultures and traditions, Western and Thai beliefs or social expectations were similar. For example, good girls are obedient, passive, beautiful, submissive, and responsible for housework. They rely on men and have no right to do or think on their own and they will only follow men's commands.*

**Keywords:** Cinderella, Pla Boo Thong, feminism, protagonist, fairy tales

### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อเปรียบเทียบความเหมือนและความต่างของตัวละครเอกหญิงในเทพนิยายเรื่อง ซินเดอเรลลา และเทพนิยายพื้นบ้านไทยเรื่อง ปลาบู่ทอง ซึ่งเทพนิยายสองเรื่องนี้ได้รับความนิยมในการอ่านอย่างกว้างขวาง โดยนำแนวคิดของทฤษฎีเฟมินิสม์ของสังคมตะวันตกในอดีตมาวิเคราะห์บทบาทของตัวละครเอกหญิงทั้งสองเรื่อง บทความเรื่องนี้ได้สะท้อนให้เห็นภาพลักษณ์ของหญิงสาวในอดีตที่คล้ายกัน ถึงแม้ว่าวัฒนธรรมและประเพณีจะแตกต่างกันแต่สังคมตะวันตกและตะวันออกก็มีความเชื่อและความคาดหวังคล้ายกัน กล่าวคือ ผู้หญิงต้องเชื่อฟัง อ่อนน้อม สวย อ่อนแอ และการทำงานบ้าน ซึ่งภาพลักษณ์ดังกล่าวทำให้ผู้หญิงในอดีตมีบทบาทเป็นรองและยอมให้ผู้ชายเป็นผู้นำ โดยที่ไม่มีสิทธิคิดหรือทำอะไรตามความต้องการของตนเองเลย นอกจากกรอคำสั่งของผู้ชายเท่านั้น

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### 1. Introduction

From the phrase “Once upon a time...,” it tells us that the tales are about heroes, heroines or evil queens. Fairy tales are universal because every society has its own folk tales that are passed down from generation to generation. According to Marie Louise Von Franz in *Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, fairy tale language seems to be [the] international language of all mankind—of all ages and of all races and cultures (27). We all know that fairy tales remind us of magic, witches, princes and princesses or anything which cannot happen in the real world. For example, people can be transformed into animals or objects and then returned to human form again. We know that they teach us about moral lessons and bring us

comfort, for instance, good people will be rewarded or bad people will be punished at the end of their lives. However, fairy tales often reflect the social expectation of gender roles in the stories, especially female roles. They are used to sustain common cultural customs that maintain the role of women to be subordinate to men. In other words, the majority of fairy tales supports a patriarchal world. In this study, the author compares the female protagonists in Western fairy tales to Asian fairy tales by selecting the famous two fairy tales, *Cinderella* and *Pla Boo Thong*, because these two classic fairytale contents are similar. The article also explores the socio-cultural contexts that shape the broad characters, the fantastic elements in relation to Western and Thai belief, and gender issues.

## 2. Female Protagonist in Fairy Tales

In fairy tales, the heroine is always perfect in every way. She is beautiful, kind, helpful, and compassionate. She is the idealized “good girl.” She is also helpless, naïve and lacks a degree of intelligence. There have been several theorists who have discussed the concept of a good girl in the past. For example, Lam Ka Yee’s “Feminie Roles in Fairy Tales and Folktales” illustrated common feminine traits as a good girl in the old Western classic fairy tales. In the old days, a good girl referred to the girl who follows the expectation of the society. Likely, in Barbara Welter’s “The Cult of True Woman Hood,” the ideal of womanhood is the expectation imposed on women by society. In the nineteenth century, if women lived without the virtues, they were not women at all. Those virtues are obedience, purity, passivity, and doing domestic work. In the previous times, it was said that obedience is the ideal characteristic of women. As Frances B. Cogan (1989) pointed out, in a male society, truly feminine women had certain natural characteristics such as obedience. In terms of obedience, women had to obey their parents and husband. Stevie Davis (1994) mentioned in *The Ideal of Women in Renaissance Literature*, women had to obey their parents who were seen as important people in the family. However, if they were married, their husbands had to rule over them and most of them had to obey or listen to their husband without argument.

The next virtue was purity which was morally compulsory. Women must preserve their virginity until marriage. If she lost her virginity, she would become worthless. It can be said that purity is a gift from God that humans have to preserve, especially the female.

Another virtue was passivity. Women were viewed as weak and helpless, unable to take any initiative to persist. Certainly, in the past, men were more powerful than women and women depended more on men. A mother or a wife, for instance, represented a woman who was always passive, and the woman who submitted to her husband or father was ideal (qtd. in Romruen 12 ). In the old days, women had no rights, and their lives belonged to their father or husband; therefore, they had to stay at home and live under men’s control. Consequently, women were expected to be passive and patient, since their positions were to encourage, comfort and obey their husbands (Rosaldo 1974).

“Inside sat a lovely maiden embroidering a towel with silver and gold. She sat with her hostess at the embroidery frame; they embroidered the towel and talked together” (qtd. in Metz 8). An example from the story above shows that women were expected to do housework, doing things such as cooking and cleaning because men believed that women had to do this kind of work. Bruno Bettelheim (1975) asserts that taking care of the households is the task of a woman to prepare herself before a marriage. It can be said that this is perhaps the biggest role a woman had. Thus, this article aims to compare the similarities of the female protagonists in two fairy tales; *Cinderella* and *Pla Boo Thong*.

### 3. Cinderella

Cinderella is the female protagonist in the fairytale. In *Cinderella*, the title of character most clearly exhibits the virtues of obedience, passivity, and domesticity. According to the story, Cinderella is obedient to her father, stepmother, and a fairy godmother. In *Cinderella*, Cinderella accepts her father's decision when he wants to remarry with another woman after her mother died. She is happy to know that her father will bring his new wife and two stepsisters to live together. Although Cinderella is ordered to work hard, she never complains. When the King invites all beautiful girls to dance with his son at the palace, Cinderella also wants to join the party, but her stepmother and stepsisters give her a long list of chores to be sure that Cinderella cannot go to the ball. Cinderella obeys her stepmother without argument. She listens and does everything she is commanded to do. However, a good girl who often listens to her parents will finally be rewarded. Hence, you can see that because of obedience, Cinderella is rewarded with the supernatural power. A fairy godmother comes to help her and she can finally go to the ball. Cinderella also obeys the fairy godmother and makes sure that she follows the fairy godmother's suggestion. We can see that at the last stroke of the clock at midnight, Cinderella hurries to return home, because she remembers what the fairy godmother said. Cinderella believes that by doing as the fairy godmother's command, it will be useful for her, and she will finally be rewarded.

Cinderella is also a passive woman. She encounters hardship in her life, but does nothing about it. She waits for a prince to come to her rescue. In the story, she only places her hopes in the fairy godmother and magic. For example, Cinderella desires to attend the ball, but she has no beautiful dress to wear. Suddenly, an old woman appears behind her—she is the fairy godmother who gives Cinderella a beautiful dress and helps her go to the ball. We can see that the issue of passivity is revealed again and again in this story, for example, when Cinderella is locked inside the room by her stepmother. This situation shows that Cinderella is passive, because she does nothing in order to escape from the room. She waits for her animal friends to help her. The story emphasizes that Cinderella's life is one of waiting. In addition, Marcia Lieberman (1986) also asserts that Cinderella plays a passive role in the story because after leaving the party, the only thing that Cinderella can do is waiting for the charming prince. She must wait patiently while the prince keeps seeking for her as the owner of the glass slipper. From the above discussion, it is clear that Cinderella is a passive girl because she does nothing in order to achieve her goal, but what she can do is to wait for someone to rescue her.

Most women are intended to be the woman of a household. Cinderella is a good example of this virtue. Barbara Welter (1996) in "The Cult of True Womanhood," mentions that in the past, cooking, sewing, washing, cleaning the house and taking care of children were the duties for housewives or daughters, leaving no doubt that their place was in the home catering to the husband or the parents. Cinderella is like a servant. She gets up before daybreak, carries water, lights fires, cooks and washes. It can be said that Cinderella is a good girl and good at domesticity. While she does domestic work in the house, her two stepsisters do nothing. Therefore, the story portrays a female protagonist who should possess domesticity. Brittaney N. Maggaiore (2003), in "Female Discrimination in Fairy Tales," mentions that the girl who is good at domestic work will always be rewarded with a marriage to a man.

### 4. Pla Boo Thong

Like *Cinderella*, *Pla Boo Thong* is a Thai folktale that has been passed down through generations and reserved for teaching moral values when told to Thai children. Auey is the female protagonist in *Pla*

*Boo Thong*. She is very beautiful as well as having her inner beauty of being selfless and grateful to her parents and even her wicked-stepmother and stepsisters. In a Thai folktale, Auey is the eldest sister. She lives with her parents and stepmother. One day, the father hit her mother and pushed her into the river while they were fishing. After that, Auey lived with her father and wicked-stepmother and stepsisters; Aai and Ie.

In *Pla Boo Thong*, the title character most clearly exhibits the virtues of submissiveness, passivity and domesticity. Auey is submissive because she feels inferior to her father, stepmother, and stepsisters. Preeyaporn Chareonbutra (2008) in *Comparison of the Gender Values: Western Tales and Thai Tales*, states that submissive women were found more in literature because women of high rank were inferior to their male leaders (18). We can say that traditionally, society expects women to be subordinate from birth. They belong to their father and husband. Auey's father thinks that she is weak, always depends on him and so it is good for her to stay at home and do housework. Thus, Auey is under her father's control and accepts her role. For example, the story-teller writes: "Khanitthi and Tharaka (her father) do not allow Auey to stay idle for a long time. The following morning Khanitthi pointed her finger at Auey and cruelly ordered her to work hard all day. (16)" This not only defines the expectation of the society, but also shows that she obeys her father's words and does everything without complaint.

In addition, Auey is oppressed by her stepmother. She is faced with her wicked-stepmother and two stepsisters' jealousy because of her beauty. The three antagonists try to kill Auey: "When Nang Kanitthi and her daughter realized that Thao Phommthat appointed Auey as the queen. They were jealous and tried to kill her. They sent Aai and Ie to see the Queen Auey and told her that her father was really sick. As soon as Auey stepped into the house, she fell into a big pan with boiling water and died immediately." These examples show the negative sibling relationship in Thai tales is that primarily caused by rivalry and jealousy.

Auey is also passive. Like Cinderella, Auey does not do anything for herself. She waits for her fate without struggle. In the story, when she knows that her mother becomes a fish and is killed by her wicked-stepmother, she does not know how to solve the problem. She just bursts into tears. Again, an animal comes to her rescue. Ducks keep scales in their mouths to show it to Auey. She buries the scales in the forest and prays that her mother would become eggplant trees. Fortunately, the god pities Auey because she is so grateful that the god inspired her to get the things she wants. Moreover, the act of wishing for something shows the passive act of females (qtd. in. Romruen 26). First, she wishes God comes to help her mother. Second, she dreams of happiness and wishes her dream come true. Finally, she finds the prince and they live together. From the above discussion, it seems obvious to say that the female protagonists in fairytales end the story with marriage. The chance to meet the prince, together with her beauty, leads her to achieve her goal.

Auey also emphasizes domesticity. In order to be successful in married life, women are expected to be good housewives. In *Pla Boo Thong*, the story-teller writes; "Auey was asked to do all the housework such as cooking, mopping, and dish washing" (18). This presents that a woman was expected to be like a servant, because her duties were also to take care of and comfort family members, especially men, including her father and her husband. Hence, it is emphasized that the place for a woman is in the home.

## 5. Conclusion

From this article, it is clear that the two female protagonists in *Cinderella* and *Pla Boo Thong* are alike in many aspects. Cinderella and Auey play the passive role in their families and societies. They depend on the people around them and wait for help from the supernatural, animals and a prince. These two fairy tales show that women in the past should possess the characteristics of obedience, submissiveness, passivity and domesticity. They will be rewarded with happy marriages if they follow the social expectations. We can observe from these two stories, that women in the past did not study or work outside the home. They were trained to do housework and stay at home. Mostly, women had to listen to the commands of family's leader and did as they were ordered. They were dependent on men and needed help from them. However, we can see that women are different nowadays. Their status has improved substantially. They have numerous opportunities to study, work and do not have to depend on men for financial support, because they can earn money by themselves. This reflects the fact that women of today differ from those in the past because they can do many different jobs and stand by themselves.

However, the issue of equality of men and women is still problematic. Although women of today have more rights, there are still some stereotypes; for example, men are regarded as stronger, while women are regarded as weaker. However, today women can be strong and independent and live without assistance from men. This is different from the way Cinderella and Auey is shown in the fairytales.

From this article, the author has learned that the expectation about the perfect woman in both Western and Thai societies were similar in the past. At present, these expectations have changed. Women are now free from men's domination. Knowledge and abilities can support them in their lives and jobs, unlike in the past, where women were judged for their beauty, not their ability and they believed that beauty was a very important tool to attract men. Then, they focused only on beauty, not on study. However, beauty cannot make women achieve their goals, if they do not have high abilities. In other words, education and ability are very important for women. In terms of obedience and domesticity, some women are still obedient and do housework. The society still expects women to obey and take care of their parents. In addition, the ideas of women doing housework all the time still exists to the present day, because we believe that when young girls grow up, they will become good housewives. These thoughts may be placed in the minds of some girls today.

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