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Gretel Rewritten: Deconstructing Gender in Niamh Murphy's *Gretel: A Fairy Tale*
Retold

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By

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Letter of Recommendation

Mrs. Junu Rai has completed her thesis entitled, “Gretel Rewritten: Deconstructing Gender in Niamh Murphy’s *Gretel: A Fairy Tale Retold*” under my supervision. She carried out her research from February 2024 to January 2025. I hereby recommend this thesis to be submitted for viva voce.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled, “Gretel Rewritten: Deconstructing Gender in Niamh Murphy’s *Gretel: A Fairy Tale Retold*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Mrs. Junu Rai has been approved by the following undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis entitled “Gretel Rewritten: Deconstructing Gender in Niamh Murphy’s *Gretel: A Fairy Tale Retold*” is an original piece of work under the supervision of Mr. Mahesh Paudyal, Ass. Professor, University Campus, Central Department of English, Kirtipur. And it is submitted in the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts in English. This thesis report has not been submitted to any other university or institution for the award of any degree or diploma.

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Abstract

This study explores the reversal of traditional gender roles and the reimagining of female positionality in Gretel: A Fairy Tale Retold by Niamh Murphy. By analyzing Murphy's retelling of the classic Brothers Grimm fairy tale Hansel and Gretel, this research examines how the portrayal of women challenges conventional gender norms and archetypes found in traditional folklore. In contrast to the passive, dependent role of Gretel in the original version, Murphy's Gretel is an active, empowered character who takes charge of her own destiny, demonstrating agency and independence. The study applies Judith Butler's feminist theory, particularly her concept of gender performativity, to argue that gender identity is socially constructed and can be reshaped through the performance of actions. Through textual analysis, this paper investigates how the characters' actions in Murphy's retelling defy traditional gender expectations, offering a subversion of power dynamics typically associated with female roles in fairy tales. Additionally, the study compares the representation of women in both the original and retold versions, highlighting the transformation of Gretel's character from a passive figure into a strong, resourceful protagonist. Ultimately, this research illustrates how Gretel: A Fairy Tale Retold challenges gendered representations, offering a modern perspective on the possibilities for women's agency within societal narratives.

Keywords: Gretel, reversed positionality, new woman, breaking the archetypes,

This study focuses on examining the portrayal of women in Niamh Murphy's retelling; *Gretel: A Fairy Tale Retold* and comparing it to the original version by Brothers Grimm. The traditional narrative of *Hansel and Gretel* reflects gender stereotypes and archetypal roles prevalent in classic folklore, where women are often depicted within limited and passive roles. In contrast, Murphy's retelling challenges

these conventions by presenting Gretel as a proactive and resourceful character who takes control of her own destiny. This prompts the following research questions: How does Murphy's retelling subvert traditional gender roles and stereotypes in *Gretel: A Fairy Tale Retold*? What are the differences in the portrayal of female characters, particularly Gretel and the witch, between Murphy's retelling and the original version by Brothers Grimm? How does the retelling contribute to reshaping narratives around women's agency and empowerment in fairy tales? These questions aim to explore the ways in which Murphy's retelling offers a more detailed and positive portrayal of women, challenging traditional gender norms and expectations within the genre of fairy tales.

Traditionally, women in stories, fairy tales, and legends are limited to archetypal positions that would represent our society's standards and expectations. Frequently presented as damsels in distress, such stories concentrate around expecting rescue by males or upholding social norms of beauty and purity. While some classic stories include powerful female characters, their roles are often limited, and they are the exception rather than the rule. Those tales would mirror and reinforce gender stereotypes, confining women to particular socio-cultural boundaries just as the classic fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel* by Brothers Grimm does. In this fairy tale, as Jung (2014) states archetypal roles as "universal images or specific stamps handed down through long periods of time" (8), women are portrayed within the archetypal roles prevalent in traditional folklore. The primary female figures are the Gretel, her mother and the witch. The mother is depicted as the stepmother, and her character aligns with the wicked stepmother archetype found in many fairy tales. The witch, residing in the gingerbread house in the woods, represents another facet of the female archetype. She is portrayed as a malevolent figure who intends to harm the children.

Similarly, Gretel is shown in a gender lens, such as she is a woman by gender and therefore the witch also does not prefer to eat her.

Meanwhile, Niamh Murphy's *Gretel: A Fairy Tale Retold* (2013) is a story that accepts women's existence and acknowledges their potentials. It attempts to challenge the conventional norms of storytelling by switching the gender roles. It believes that females are also capable of doing what the males can. The binary opposition here should not be focused on the organs but on the activities males and females both do because "Gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Butler 25). So, the organ has nothing to do with the respect to be offered. So, Niamh Murphy's *Gretel: A Fairy Tale Retold* offers a modern twist on the traditional tale, providing a positive portrayal of women and their gender roles. Unlike the passive Gretel of the original tale, who is often overshadowed by her brother Hansel, this version places Gretel at the forefront, showcasing her agency and determination. She is not merely a victim of circumstance but an active participant in shaping her own story. In this retelling, she emerges as a strong, independent character who defies traditional gender expectations. Rather than being relegated to a passive role, she takes charge of her own destiny, displaying courage, resourcefulness, and intelligence throughout the narrative.

The original version of *Hansel and Gretel* by Grimm Brothers presents two little children living with their father, a woodcutter, and stepmother amidst hatred and violence. At first, the stepmother makes a discussion with their father to exile them as they run out of food. But Hansel weaves a plan and even when left in the jungle, he leads himself and his sister home following the pebbles he had dropped. But, the next day becomes the worst as he gets no chance to collect pebbles as before. So, he drops some crumbs of bread given by the stepmother. But, the crumbs are eaten by birds

resulting in making the siblings difficult to navigate home. So they wander in the jungle and find a home made out of confectionary. A witch appears and says “Nibble, nibble, like a mouse, who is nibbling at my house?” (4). She sees two young children and invites them in. But Gretel discovers that the witch wants to feast on Hansel. As the witch prepares her imaginary feast, she employs Gretel into a hard work in order to fatten Hansel. She cages him and tells to give a finger every day to measure his fatness. Hansel gives her a bone in return. Angrily, the witch tells Gretel to prepare the oven for baking Hansel. Tactfully, Gretel asks her how to know if the water is ready. Then she kicks the witch when she instructs going near to oven. Then the two siblings collect as much treasure as possible and get home. They find that the stepmother is already expired. So, they begin a happy life ever after.

On the other hand, *Gretel* by Niamh Murphy presents the same siblings who have already embarked on a journey to a jungle in search of food and shelter. They get a face-to-face with a pack of wolves and get saved by a woman unknown to them. At first, Hans suspects that woman but Gretel enforces him to follow her as she invites them to her cottage. Upon reaching to her cottage, both of the siblings stay with curiosity and fear but the woman appears to be safe to Gretel. They [Gretel and the woman] start conversing. The woman reveals her name as Maeve. Then Maeve gives potion to Hans and makes him sleep longer in order to undergo a treatment of the wound he had while fighting against the wolves. Next day, Hans tells Gretel to leave Maeve’s house as he suspects she is a witch. Gretel attempts to convince him saying that Maeve is not a threat but Hans has no point to agree with. As the story unfolds, Gretel grows up with a kind of attachment with Maeve and longs for intimacy. They even sleep together naked but untouched. Next day, they go to jungle in search of food leaving Hans alone at home. On the second day, both of them kiss,

touch their internal parts, bite tongues and lastly make a copulation ending up in fingering each other. The next day, Gretel wakes up in a new place where Hans seems to be camping fire. She searches for Maeve but finds that she is miles away from her. She asks her brother about their location and destination. Upon knowing the fact that Hans burnt Maeve to separate Gretel from her, Gretel cries in pain and tries to run for Maeve. Hans forces her angrily to follow him towards the village. But she denies and resists on finding Maeve. Though he admits Maeve is gone, she doesn't believe and soon she sees some wolves approaching towards her. Hans shouts at her to run but she can't move a leg. After telling his sister to run time and again, Hans runs himself leaving his sister vulnerable. As wolves get back without harming Gretel, she heads towards Maeve recalling "her mantra 'river, oak, hill, farm'" (39). Upon reaching to the burnt carcass of Maeve's home, Gretel cries calling to Maeve. To her surprise, "Maeve looked at her and laughed, she stroked Gretel's cheek and pulled her forward again to hold her, to have her back, to complete her world and never be alone again" (40).

The former version portrays women in a traditional societal framework while the latter presents them with their authority and agency in which the male counterparts have very less to do. Historically, women were perceived as a "defective and incomplete version of man" in which "a man is superior and woman is inferior because the former rules and the latter is ruled" (Aristotle, I Chapter 13). But this kind of definition of women changed in the course of time as different critics started questioning the binary opposition and its justice mechanism. bell hooks argues, "They (women) could break free of male domination and be more self-determining in their lifestyle" (5). This is the way through which women can break the chain of stereotypical gender roles and expectations. Niamh Murphy's *Gretel: A Fairy Tale*

Retold also challenges traditional gender roles by presenting female characters in diverse roles and capacities. Women are depicted as individuals with their own desires, strengths, and weaknesses, rather than mere archetypes or stereotypes.

Regarding this portrayal, Christina Rose Andrews argues:

“One of my least favorite fairy tales was Hansel and Gretel. I’ve never liked the misogyny in the tale. And I’ve never liked the moral. . . witches are bad, step-families are bad, men are smart. On the other hand, *Gretel: A Fairy Tale Retold* by Niamh Murphy takes the core of the Hansel and Gretel tale, shakes it up, and throws it out onto its ear” (1).

This remark also adds that the original version put women in the archetypal positions meanwhile the retold version reversed that position reevaluating the gender roles and performativity.

Similarly, the acknowledgements to women characters and praising their roles are what make the story distinct from the original version. Not only that, this retold version overshadows the presence of male character. Danika Ellis, a lesbian critic and book editor argues:

“*Gretel* isn’t that long and is a bit fast paced, but then again, so was the original story. Hans and Gretel are introduced while running away from wolves and fortunately they are saved by a ‘woman’ who offers them lodging until Hans heals... I found Maeve to be an interesting character because she’s ‘kind and feminine but still strong, physically and mentally’. I absolutely hated Hans. Perhaps if it was longer, we could have seen a nice side of him. The writing was simple but effective and emphatic” (1).

This remark also aligns to the role played by the female characters of the novella such as Gretel and Maeve. The disclosure of hating Hans (a male character) shows the break away from the traditional gender roles he performs in the story. In other word, we can see that there is no compulsion to acknowledge male counterparts as they used to be before.

In Murphy's retelling, Gretel emerges as a proactive and resourceful character who takes control of her own destiny. Rather than passively accepting her circumstances, she actively seeks solutions to the challenges she faces, demonstrating courage and *determination*. However, in the original version of *Hansel and Gretel* by Brothers Grimm, Gretel is depicted as more submissive and reliant on her brother Hansel for guidance and protection. Lola Andrews discusses in *Lolaandrews.com*:

“Tormented by a pack of bloodthirsty wolves, Hans and his sister Gretel, run for their lives. Desperation leads them into the comforting arms of a beautiful woman who asks for nothing in return for her kindness. While Gretel finds herself drawn to the seductress, Hans grows suspicious of her motives. Torn between a brother she adores and a woman she can't help but admire, Gretel is forced to make a choice”(1).

This makes a sense that Gretel owns the agency of her own. She doesn't rely on her brother as in the original version. She makes a choice, she makes decisions. And Hans has to follow her. In the previous version, Hansel was clever and he had a job to rescue his sister. But this positionality is reversed and shown that Gretel is responsible for their rescue.

In the original version by Grimm, the witch is portrayed as a malevolent and sinister figure who preys on children. She is depicted as cunning and manipulative,

using sweet treats to lure Hansel and Gretel into her clutches before revealing her true intentions. The witch's actions are driven by greed and malice. In Murphy's retold version, the witch is presented as a benevolent character for Hans and Gretel. She is exiled by the villagers for going against social norms (desiring a girl). But, she is portrayed much positively than in the original version. Nosferatu argues:

“Hard year after a hard year left many a village abandoned as people ventured out to find work and food. Among them were Hans and Gretel. After tough luck they found themselves saved from wolves by a strong and clever woman. She sheltered them, gave them plenty of food. Seems that hardships never befell her. The tale is too short to leave a lasting impact, but it's well written for what it is. Characters are great, their actions and reactions were logical, and, come on, who doesn't love a witch in the woods?”(1)

The above excerpts show that the witch, Maeve is seen as a strong and clever woman who seems to be saving people rather than preying upon them. She seems so kind, so philanthropic and humanitarian.

Gretel and Maeve defy traditional gender expectations by challenging societal norms and expectations placed on women. They refuse to conform to passive or submissive roles, instead asserting their autonomy and agency in determining own fate. Justina Johnson depicts in Goodreads:

“Maeve, Hans and Gretel's savior, is magnificent, mysterious, and an angel in Gretel's eyes. Hans sees the devil at work here and brands Maeve a witch for no substantial reason. I adored Maeve. She hints at the reason she was banished to Gretel, possibly sowing the seed for Gretel's growing affection. Are we witnessing a witch's magic or a strong, lonely woman offering help

and shelter? This is a truly imaginative, inventive, and ingenious re-telling of such a beloved classic. I felt completely immersed as if I shared Gretel's mind and body. I became enthralled by Maeve and yes, possibly bewitched. (1)

This review also advocates in favor of the portrayal of women in the retold version. Projecting both female members strong and responsible showcases a reversed position of females in storytelling of modern times. Despite the significant attention to gender dynamics in Murphy's retelling, there remains a research gap in understanding the complex portrayal and empowerment of female characters, particularly Gretel and Maeve, and their defiance of societal norms and gender expectations. This study will explore how these characters navigate agency, autonomy, and empowerment within the context of the retelling, shedding light on the evolving representation of women in literature.

This study employs a qualitative research approach, guided by Judith Butler's feminist theory as prescribed in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*(1990), to explore the reversed gender roles and stereotypes in Niamh Murphy's *Gretel: A Fairy Tale Retold*. Through methods such as textual analysis and critical interpretation of narrative elements, the research aims to investigate how Murphy's retelling challenges traditional gender norms and expectations within the fairy tale genre. Drawing on Butler's concept of gender performativity, the study seeks to examine how female characters in the retelling negotiate and resist societal expectations, particularly through their actions and agency. Additionally, Butler's emphasis on the intersectionality of gender with other social categories such as race and class will inform the analysis of how these factors influence the portrayal of female characters in the retelling.

Butler defines gender trouble not as the trouble of those who participate in a frequent debates regarding feminism. But she views it as something “that would get ‘one’ in trouble” (1) all the time. So, either it is a fairy tale, a movie or a song or a story, we can see a representation of gender. But this representation has troubled many since long. Therefore, Butler defines representation as “an operative term in a political process that seeks to extend visibility to women as political subjects” (1). With this reference, it is clear that gender trouble doesn’t lie in a specific gender. Rather it lies in the representation either through the everyday practice or if not through “the normative function of language which is said to reveal or distort the truth about the category of women” (1). And this representation is done via different means and methods. Simply, the folk tales, histories, novella, poems, hymns, paintings, riddles, myths, legends, fairy tales and other similar literary works of art represent or at least seems to be representing the culture, the formation of society, roles of people in accordance to their gender. This representation doesn’t merely represent the society but also the power dynamics of that society: who rules and who is ruled. Aristotelian notion makes it clear that women are ‘to be’ ruled. But, inclining to ‘gender’ we can’t specify it to a particular person or a sex because Butler’s notion in *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*(p. 21)clarifies that gender is a social construct and it can be modified later either one has a boy or girl genitals. I mean that a boy with a boy organ can become a woman by his performance and of course a girl can act like a man too. Beauvoir also claims, “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman” (283). She means that one is not born woman, the situation makes that one woman.

Following the archetypal mechanism of a society, so many generations lived their life without a point to go against it. But Butler’s feminist point of view tries to break these norms away introducing new dynamics in which both gender can enrich,

enhance and practice their autonomy and power. More basically, she inclines in enriching women's agency and authority in order to balance the power dynamics of our society. Since she finds imbalance between the representation of males and females, she suggests the language of representation to "foster the political visibility of women" (1). She means that women are politically underrepresented or not justifiably represented. Therefore, the representation of women in *Hansel and Gretel* can be vividly analyzed using this theory digging out some loopholes of the portrayal of women in the then societies and literature. Comparing with how *Gretel: The Fairy Tale Retold* represents women, the reversal of women can be understood better.

In the original version *Hansel and Gretel*, a female character is portrayed in different forms: there is a stepmother but not a stepfather, there is a sister that depends upon her brother for her protection, there is a witch but not a wizard. There are more scenes of women's representation to look at. First of all, the portrayal of stepmother in the original version is something important to discuss about. In the story, the stepmother weaves a plan to get rid of children as they run into a food crisis caused by natural calamities. She has a masterplan to reduce the mouths therefore resulting in longevity in food saving. She admits, "I will tell you what, husband, we will take the children early in the morning into the forest, where it is thickest; we will make them a fire, and we will give each of them a piece of bread, then we will go to our work and leave them alone; they will never find the way home again, and we shall be quit of them" (1).

This plan annoys her husband and he directly rejects to agree with her. He replies, "No, wife, I cannot do that; I cannot find in my heart to take my children into the forest and to leave them there alone; the wild animals would soon come and devour them" (1). To his reply, she leaves no peace until his consent blackmailing

him to make coffins ready otherwise. Her insistence makes the man follow her plan. This portrayal of a woman as a stepmother shows that stepmother is cruel, rude and heartless. The stepmother shows no mercy to the children who always wants to penetrate the stepchildren. Giving one-one bread to each and she says, "Get up, you, lazy bones; we are going into the forest to cut wood. That is for dinner, and you must not eat it before then, for you will get no more" (2). Her intention in the story seems to chase the children away as quickly as possible.

In contrast to the original version, the retold version by Murphy initiates the story from a setting of jungle where both siblings fall into a problem as they navigate for a safer place leaving the village that is ill-fortuned for less harvest. This story doesn't discuss or portray a stepmother trying to show that a stepmother has no point to be responsible for a natural calamity like coldness and food crisis. The story sets its path saying, "Taut, spectral bodies, dark shadows, darting in and out of the trees all around them, surrounding them, but even as they closed in, she continued to run" (6). Here, the author doesn't insert a female character to blame for a natural malady. The representation of women sounds balanced or if not at least not discriminatory in the latter version. If there was no stepmother, the former story wouldn't have a start or otherwise would have a different setting causing the family stay together. The latter one presents the nature that replaces any villain's role therefore there is no clue of representing a cruel woman character who has to die at last for the resolution. The story presents nature as the villain. It progresses "They'd lost a lot of livestock in the winter but then the next harvest was even worse. There were simply no reserves: many of the villagers were still starving from the winter... It was then that Hans and Gretel were forced to leave the village" (8).

Besides this, the former version presents a male protagonist; Hansel. He is given the lead role although his dad also has some roles in the beginning and at the end. He was the one who collected the pebbles in order to get back home. Then, “Hansel took his little sister by the hand, and followed the way where the flint stones shone like silver, and showed them the road” (3). He was the one who consoled and assured Gretel to safely take her back home by saying, “Wait a little while longer, until the moon rises, and then we can easily find the way home” (3). He was the one to whom the witch longed to feast on. The witch screams, “Now then, Gretel be quick and draw water; be Hansel fat or be he lean, tomorrow I must kill and cook him” (5). He was the one who navigated home later taking his sister along. He lastly says to his sister, “Now, away we go, if we only can get out of the witch’s wood” (6). Then they proceed to their village.

The original version can be interpreted aligning it with Butler’s notion of interpreting women. She says, “There is a good deal about the diverse experiences of women that is being expressed and still needs to be expressed, but caution is needed with respect to that theoretical language” (530-31). Some cautious understanding is needed to express about the femaleness without disturbing their freedom of sexual difference. Doing so helps to “offer alternative descriptions and prescriptions; indeed, to establish philosophy as a cultural practice, and to criticize its tenets from marginalized cultural locations” (Butler 530).

In contrast to the original, the retold version follows the philosophy as Butler opines. Murphy presents Gretel as the protagonist. In this story, Gretel makes almost all decision amidst Hans’s resistance and anger. Moreover, she was the one who decided to leave the village and search for alternative of starvation. She was the one who decided to stay with Maeve amidst Hans’s frequent refusal. Hans responds

rudely to the woman[Maeve]. But, thinking of next step makes Gretel desperate so she wishes that Maeve would give them shelter. As Maeve says to follow her, Gretel agrees without listening to Hans hoping that, “She would be led somewhere warm and safe, where she could sleep soundly, just for one night. She also hoped, dearly hoped, there would be food” (9). Furthermore, Gretel was the one who made her brother follow her instructions. When Hans rejects Maeve’s proposal for one night stay at her home, Gretel says to him, “You won’t make it, Hans! You can barely stand, let alone run if we are attacked again” (10). So, she makes him stay with Maeve all three together. And lastly, she was the one who got a resolution. But Hans got disappeared. At the end of the story, Gretel “fell to her knees, exhausted with the fear of it. She knew she had lost Hans: even if he could outrun them, even if he got away, he wouldn’t come back for her” (38). And at last, the story ends with Gretel’s and Maeve’s reconciliation. Hans remains unconcealed.

Butler raises a question over philosophers’ sense of women. She argues, “Philosophers rarely think about acting in the theatrical sense, but they do have a discourse of 'acts' that maintains associative semantic meanings with theories of performance and acting” (519). Then she comes to the performative act that each gender has to offer. Additionally, she stresses upon how femininity works. Quoting Beauvoir’s statement “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman,” (181) Butler asserts, “Beauvoir is appropriating and reinterpreting this doctrine of constituting acts from the phenomenological tradition” (519). In a nutshell, Butler’s assertion inclines to the reinterpretation of traditional doctrine of sensing womanhood.

Another traditional doctrine to look at women’s portrayal is that a woman is a cruel witch who devours young children. There could be a wizard sustaining a life at jungle preying upon children. The witch is presented in such a manner that nobody

and nothing is more harmful and uglier than her. The original version narrates her as a soft hearted and kind at first, “Ah, my dear children, how come you here? You must come indoors and stay with me, you will be no trouble” (5) but as the story progresses she is presented crueller day after day ““I have them, and they shall not escape me... What a fine feast I shall have... And when he is fat enough I will eat him” (5). A woman is portrayed as a demon who feasts on human flesh. In contrary, the retold version portrays no witch at all. Though Hans references Maeve as a witch, she is not portrayed as a witch in real; it was his accuse. Hans suspects, “Perhaps she is fattening us up to eat us” (23). Gretel cross-questions, “Why would she fatten people to eat them, when she could just eat the food herself” (23). Hans has a straightforward answer, “Because she likes the taste of human flesh” (23). But Gretel, to his reply admits, “Maeve has taken us in, fed us, kept us warm and tended to your wound, but you condemn her as a witch: is that what you really think she is” (24)? Time and again Hans condemns, “You’re a fool, Gretel, she was a witch: she put you under a spell and now we must get as far from this place as we can” (36). But his accuses don’t seem accurate because the guess he made why she was exiled from the village isn’t the sole reason. Later, Maeve reveals that she was exiled from the village just because she was not in relationship with an ordinary man. When Gretel asks about that man, Maeve reveals, “It was a woman” (22). Therefore, Maeve was not a witch and not portrayed as a witch either.

In Butler’s viewpoint, the gender alone is not problematic nor is static. For her, any gender can belong to any ‘body’ (boy/girl) in course of time. She argues, “Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time; an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). Therefore, a male with male genital is not

compulsorily a man or masculine. And a female with a female genital is not compulsorily a woman or feminine. The repetitive acts that body performs are the determinants of what makes a male or female a man or woman. She further clarifies, “Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (519).

So, the weak, fragile and vulnerable body of Gretel in original version does not have anything to do with gender because even Hansel could have this body. Whereas, Gretel in the retold version seems quite strong, independent and authorial. So, the same woman can have both identities of man or woman. Therefore, the theoretical debate over gender seems irrelevant. In the original version, Gretel cries out of the pain on being a homeless but her brother consoles her assuring to take her back home. Either it was in the dense forest or at witch’s confectionary, Hansel stands as a guarding shield for her. But in the retold version, Gretel doesn’t need Hans anymore. She makes decisions, stays consistent and refuses Hans most of the time. So, looking side by side to Grimm’s Gretel, one finds a pitiful character whereas looking to Murphy’s Gretel offers a heroic character.

Gender practice follows a basic trend in a society. If one act is performed and followed by many of the community members, it becomes a culture. Either cultural or coercive, it spreads and impacts. So, Butler asserts, “If gender is instituted through acts then the appearance of substance is precisely that a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (520). In this sense, both of the versions have a role in societal practice of power dynamics and power hegemony. The former one promotes patriarchal values where women are barely given a chance to exercise

power. Let's say, they merely a support mechanism for men. But the latter version presents women as someone equal to men. This version even tries to break away the traditional norms of society. A normal relationship is seen between a male and a female. But, the retold version serves two situational relationships between three different girls. The two [Maeve and Gretel] get into a deep connection that they start longing for each other. Gretel tastes Maeve's "lips and the soft, sweet flesh of her tongue as it brushed gently against her, and she felt the firm flesh of Maeve's lip as she was unable to resist the urge to gently bite. Maeve's gentle caresses had awakened the hunger within her" (30). The story doesn't end here. Gretel sighs with an immense pleasure as she feels "Maeve's hand against her bare flesh for the first time" (30). This bond of two women can sound erotic but yet lesbian and that is what I mentioned as the break away from societal archetypes.

The phenomenological introduction of manhood or womanhood is a fluid process that our practice can change it at any time. As Descartes admits, "I think, therefore I am" (18) it is similar that to perform is to become. Butler also argues, "To be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to a historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility" (522). Looking at the lead role, the classic version presents Hansel as a hero who is accompanied by his sister Gretel, a side character. Hansel's body owns the autonomy and power where Gretel gets not much autonomy. But the retold version presents Gretel as the lead role player who exercises most of the power and autonomy. In this sense, the gender position given to males and females can be analyzed as a beam balance of power dynamics on which one stands heavier than the next. It is obvious that the original version presents a beam balance of power dynamics in which males seem weightier than the females.

To exemplify, Hansel has the power to lead his sister, he was the choice of the witch, he was the one to navigate the way home. On the other hand, Gretel has secondary but yet significant roles. In contrary, the retold version presents a balanced beam in which both of the male and female characters get equally similar role and significance. As Butler summarizes feminism as a tool to heighten females position without harming males', it is clear that the retold version does the same; it heightens Gretel's position without harming Hans'.

It is obvious that the linkage of manhood connects it to the form of human. And to be a woman has a question of humanness. Butler opines, "The false universal of 'man' has for the most part been presupposed as coextensive with humanness itself" (523). Therefore, picking Hansel as a pure form of human would be a false interpretation of humanness. The former version presents him as a wiser, much careful, and determined character whereas the retold version presents Gretel as the strong character. This distinction between the original and retold version shows that both of them have different viewpoint to interpret the agency of women. The former shows the perseverance of Hansel who handles the situations tactfully. During the discussion of the parents about exiling their children, Gretel starts weeping and Hansel says her, "Don't cry, Gretel, and go to sleep quietly, and God will help us" (3). Again when Gretel notices that they have been betrayed by their parents and left alone in the jungle, she becomes upset and cries. Meanwhile, Hansel consoles her, "Wait a little while longer, until the moon rises, and then we can easily find the way home"(3).Gretel relies on her brother's companion as she has none to take care of her. She can't help herself. But the retold version presents Gretel more patient and tactful; for Hans runs or tends to escape. He even misjudges Maeve before knowing her reality. When Maeve offers the siblings food and shelter, Gretel easily accepts hoping

for some warm food. But her brother says, “No, you have done enough, we can ask no more of you” (9) suspecting that what could a woman do. In this sense, the reversed women can be seen in Murphy’s retold version.

It has always been a quest for women to seek identity within them. Biologically, they are born with female genital [sex] but they are not acknowledged as they needed to be. Butler in her another essay “Gender Trouble (1990)” states, “The concept of sex as matter, sex as instrument of cultural signification however is a discursive formation that acts as a naturalized foundation for the nature or culture distinction in the strategies of domination that that distinction supports” (37). Such is given in the original version. The stepmother also possesses a significant contribution in the woodcutter’s life. She comes with him agreeing that she has to take care of two more children. If she hated them, she wouldn’t have come with him. She has been portrayed so negatively that all readers can sense a stepmother as never good member. Similarly, the witch is portrayed as someone voracious to children. It can promote witch accuses and social exiles which will definitely shield someone into injustice; particularly women. The retold version, on the other hand, presents a witch [indirectly Maeve] who is rather helpful and more humane than of the former version. When Gretel gets desperate and wishes if somebody could offer her shelter, Maeve [a suspected witch by Hans] says, “You can come with me” (9). At least this version doesn’t seem to marginalize women. The former version represents the tendency of the then society in which women are marginalized. The latter shows some modifications and advancements in societal norms. Therefore, women are portrayed justifiably.

In the original *Hansel and Gretel*, Gretel is granted a single, pivotal moment of agency when she pushes the witch into the oven, thereby rescuing herself and her

brother. However, this moment, though significant, is rather passive in comparison to the broader narrative, where Gretel largely follows the actions of others. Not only her family members but also the witch makes her follow, “Creep in and see if it is properly hot, so that the bread may be baked” (6). Murphy significantly amplifies Gretel’s sense of agency, portraying her not as a passive victim of circumstance but as an active participant in her own survival. Throughout Murphy’s retelling, Gretel makes deliberate, informed choices that directly impact the course of her story, particularly in her efforts to protect herself and Hansel from the looming dangers of their environment. Hans in an awkward feeling asks Gretel what to pay back to Maeve for her food, and Gretel silences him, “Hans, just eat and be thankful” (15). When Hans has no idea about what is next, Gretel makes a provision and seeks an assistance with Maeve. She says firmly, “We are looking for work” indicating that she can work for the payback of food consumed by her wounded brother. This transformation in Gretel’s character symbolizes a broader shift from reliance on external forces to an empowered self-sufficiency. In a world that is fraught with threats—be it the witch, societal expectations, or even the harsh conditions of the forest—Gretel’s agency becomes a powerful symbol of female empowerment. Her evolution from a helpless child into a resourceful and determined individual marks a significant departure from the traditional fairy tale archetype of the passive, dependent female, offering a more contemporary narrative where women take control of their own fates.

Murphy’s retelling aligns strongly with feminist interpretations of traditional fairy tales, offering a radical reimagining of Gretel’s character and her role in the narrative. In the original version by Grimm, the resolution of the story relies heavily on Gretel’s obedience to and cooperation with the male figures in her life—her brother Hansel and, indirectly, her father. Gretel’s actions are framed within the

context of fulfilling her familial obligations, and her ultimate triumph is contingent upon the assistance of others, particularly her brother. At the very beginning of the story, “Gretel wept bitterly, and said to Hansel, ‘It is all over with us.’ ‘Do be quiet, Gretel, and do not fret. I will manage something’” (1) this particular reference shows that Gretel cannot stand without her brother. In contrast, Murphy’s retelling shifts the focus onto Gretel’s individual agency and strength, portraying her as a strong, self-reliant character who actively questions and reshapes the world around her. Murphy’s Gretel does not simply follow a prescribed path laid out by others; she navigates her journey with personal resolve, intelligence, and courage, making decisions for herself and her brother without relying on male figures for direction or protection. She decides to stay with Maeve even when Hans forbids to stay saying, “We don’t know who that woman is” (13). This transformation of Gretel into an independent, resourceful protagonist serves as a feminist critique of the original narrative. Murphy’s version emphasizes a more modern, empowered perspective, where the female character is not defined by her relationships with men, but by her own decisions and actions, challenging the patriarchal structure that underpins the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tale.

In the retold version, the relationships between female characters undergo a significant transformation compared to the original. In the Brothers Grimm version, female relationships are largely framed by competition and antagonism—particularly between the stepmother and the children, as well as the witch and Gretel. The stepmother’s cruelty and the witch’s malevolent nature create a narrative steeped in division and rivalry, reinforcing traditional patriarchal tropes of women as rivals rather than allies. The stepmother decides to exile the children as she thinks she cannot endure them any longer. She says to her husband:

What will become of us? We cannot even feed our children; there is nothing left for ourselves...we will take the children early in the morning into the forest, where it is thickest; we will make them a fire, and we will give each of them a piece of bread, then we will go to our work and leave them alone; they will never find the way home again, and we shall be quit of them. (1)

Similarly, the witch has no any mercy towards a little girl. She forces Gretel to work a lot. Her wickedness sees no boundary because “she had to do what the wicked witch bade her” (5). In contrast, Murphy introduces more complex relationships among female characters, shifting the focus from divisiveness to solidarity. The interactions between women in Murphy’s retelling highlight the importance of support, collaboration, and mutual empowerment. Female characters in this version, whether they are allies or adversaries, are portrayed in a way that suggests their relationships can foster growth and resilience rather than sow division. Gretel seeks a solidarity with Maeve to whom her brother suspects all the time. She consoles him and says, “Hans, this is the first time we have been in a dry building for weeks: please let’s stay, at least for a little while” (13). Even when a male counterpart attempts to separate two women, they [two women] give their best to reconcile because “neither of them wanted to be parted. Even if it was just the thought of food, warmth and shelter, it would be hard for Gretel to say goodbye, and yet she knew there was so much more for her there than that” (28). When Hans separates them, to Gretel’s reply he says, “She was a witch, Gretel, she had you enchanted! But she is gone now, you need not worry anymore” (37) and Gretel all the time says to him, “I am going back to her” (37).

The emphasis on female solidarity serves as a powerful counterpoint to the original story’s emphasis on competition, offering a fresh perspective where women

are not simply pitted against each other but are instead capable of forming bonds that empower and uplift. This shift in dynamics also reflects a broader feminist reading, in which women actively support one another in a world that often seeks to divide them. In doing so, Murphy's retelling not only reimagines the roles of women within the fairy tale but also subtly critiques the traditional narratives that often limit women to negative, one-dimensional roles. Through these relationships, Murphy highlights the potential for female solidarity to provide strength and hope, even in the most perilous of circumstances.

In the original *Hansel and Gretel* by the Brothers Grimm, patriarchal authority plays a significant role in shaping the children's fate. The father's role, while reluctant, is crucial in abandoning his children, illustrating his complicity in the narrative's patriarchal structure. He could abandon his wife but he follows the dictates of his wife and the societal expectations of male authority, leaving the children to fend for themselves in the wilderness. This reinforces a traditional, patriarchal view where male figures dictate the course of events, often with dire consequences for women and children. Though his words, "But I really pity the poor children" (2) may sound choiceless, he seems obedient to his wife. Not only that, Hansel as a priority of witch and Hansel as the safeguard for Gretel also shows that the narrative makes a linkage to patriarchy. In Murphy's retelling, however, the father's influence is reinterpreted, and his authority over Gretel's destiny is significantly diminished. While he still plays a role in the story, his power is no longer absolute, and Gretel is portrayed as a character who takes control of her own fate. By shifting the focus from male-driven decision-making to Gretel's active role in shaping her life, Murphy's narrative challenges traditional patriarchal structures, positioning Gretel as a protagonist who defies the oppressive systems that seek to control her.

While the original tale confines Gretel to a reactive role, primarily focused on survival and conforming to societal expectations of obedience and caregiving, Murphy's retelling positions her as an agent of self-discovery and transformation. Gretel's journey through the forest becomes a process of resisting and renegotiating the norms that seek to define her, reflecting Butler's idea that identity is not innate but continually performed and reconstituted. Through her trials, Gretel rejects static roles and embraces an evolving sense of self, symbolizing a liberatory approach to gender and identity that disrupts essentialist portrayals and highlights the fluidity and agency of the modern female subject. When Hans forces her to navigate somewhere very far from Maeve, Gretel makes a direct denial and even makes Hans return alone. When they get a pack of wolves, he says to his sister, "'RUN!' Hans shouted again, backing off, away from the wolves as they pelted ever closer" (37). But Gretel chose to escape from that patriarchal giant [Hans].

Murphy's retelling introduces a more inclusive and diverse range of themes, including queer undertones or explicitly queer characters, which are largely absent in traditional fairy tales. By integrating these elements, Murphy's narrative challenges the heteronormative structures that have traditionally defined fairy tales, offering a more expansive representation of human relationships and identities. This inclusion of queer themes adds depth to Gretel's character and her relationships, providing a broader spectrum of experiences that resonate with contemporary readers. In the original version, there is a mere representation of coupling between a male and female such as the father and stepmother. But the newer version presents a different coupling between two ladies violating the traditional norms of heterosexuality. The two ladies; Gretel and Maeve, involve in an intense emotional bonding that they cannot imagine to apart from each other. They make physical bonding as well:

Maeve placed her hand behind Gretel's knee, pulling her leg to hook it against her hip as she slid her hand beneath Gretel's skirts. Gretel gasped as she felt Maeve's hand against her bare flesh for the first time. Nerves and excitement twisted around inside her. Yet she felt safe in Maeve's hands, not just safe but right. It felt right that the first hand on her naked thigh should be Maeve's. She wanted to give herself completely to this woman. (30)

Therefore, in this version, Gretel's journey becomes not just about survival, but about exploring her own identity and the fluidity of her desires, emotions, and connections. This modern reimagining creates space for characters to exist outside of traditional gender roles and heteronormative expectations, fostering a more inclusive narrative that recognizes the diversity of human experience. By incorporating queer representation, Murphy's retelling encourages readers to reconsider rigid societal expectations around gender and sexuality.

In the Brothers Grimm's version, Gretel's heroism is often overshadowed by her reliance on her brother and her eventual role in helping to defeat the witch. While she does take action in pushing the witch into the oven, her bravery is framed as a reactive, somewhat fearful response to a dire situation. The Grimms' narrative of heroism centers largely on traditional male ideals, such as physical strength, courage, and aggressive action, reinforcing a gendered distinction between heroic qualities. In Murphy's retold version, the definition of heroism is reimagined through a female lens. Gretel's bravery is not just a reactive act, but a proactive assertion of her own agency. She exhibits resilience, intelligence, and compassion, qualities that define her heroism in Murphy's version. Not only Gretel, but also Maeve is portrayed as a heroic figure who throws an axe to the wolf. "The wolf yelped and twisted its body as it fell to the ground, an axe buried deep in its neck" (6). In surprise, Gretel looks back to the

direction the axe came from and “she saw, just a few paces away, a woman” (6) in a bold and dashing appearance. This redefinition of heroism illustrates that true courage is not solely based on physical strength or violence but can also stem from emotional intelligence, empathy, and the ability to overcome adversity. By shifting the focus from traditional male-centric forms of heroism to a more holistic, female-centered perspective, Murphy’s retelling challenges conventional notions of what it means to be a hero

In the original Grimm tale, Gretel’s fate is largely shaped by external forces: her father’s decision to abandon her and her brother, the witch’s captivity, and Hansel’s actions. Gretel’s role is reactive; she makes a significant choice at the end when she pushes the witch into the oven, but even then, her actions are motivated by a desperate need to escape. In contrast, Murphy’s Gretel is given much more agency in shaping her own destiny. Throughout the story, Gretel is presented with a series of choices—both small and large—that reflect her autonomy and her ability to determine her future. These choices are not just about survival but also about asserting her power and identity in a world that seeks to control her. When Hans leads her to jungle, it ultimately results them in a trap of wolf pack then Gretel says him, “I am not leaving with you. I am not letting you lead me into the path of those wolves again, not while you can’t walk” (19). When Hans takes Gretel away from Maeve, Gretel insists, “Hans, I have to go back”(35). Again, Hans tells her to go to village because Maeve is no more, Gretel gives no care to him because “she would not listen to him, she would not be persuaded by him, he had nothing to say to her that would make her listen” (36). It suggests that our ability to make choices, especially difficult ones, is one of the defining aspects of our humanity, and that true freedom lies in the power to define one’s own path, regardless of the forces that seek to dictate it.

The forest is a recurring motif in both the Grimm version and Murphy's retelling, but in the original tale, it primarily symbolizes danger, fear, and the unknown. The children are abandoned in the wilderness and face numerous threats from the witch and the harsh conditions of the forest. The stepmother suggests her husband to "take the children early in the morning into the forest, where it is thickest" (1). And again, the stepmother plans to "take them farther into the wood this time" (3). The forest also has a witch who is even more dangerous than the stepmother and hunger for them. In Murphy's retelling, however, nature takes on a more complex role. While still a place of danger, the wilderness becomes a setting for personal transformation and empowerment. For Maeve, that forest becomes a shelter that teaches her endurance, tolerance and survival. Even the villagers like Gretel siblings were running out of village due to food crisis. But Maeve was living in the jungle with ample amount of food. So that, Hans suspects, "How can she have so much food?" (17) For Gretel, the forest is not just a hostile environment but also a place where she discovers her inner strength, learns to trust her instincts, and faces the challenges that allow her to grow. The wilderness represents both challenges and possibility: it is a place where survival is difficult, but it also provides the space for self-discovery, growth, and self-reliance.

In the traditional version, the witch is depicted as a purely evil figure who seeks to devour the children for her own selfish desires. She is a one-dimensional villain whose motivations are rooted in greed and malice. Murphy's retelling, however, offers a simpler interpretation of the witch, potentially exploring her motivations and offering a more sympathetic view of her character. In Murphy's viewpoint, the witch is not an outright evil figure but a product of her circumstances, shaped by her own trauma, survival instincts, or societal rejection. She confesses that

she was exiled not because she was a real witch but because she had “the misfortune of falling in love with the wrong person” (15). By offering a more multidimensional view of the witch, Murphy’s retelling encourages readers to question simplistic moral judgments and to see the potential for complexity in every character.

In conclusion, Murphy’s retelling offers a profound reinterpretation of female identity, power dynamics, and relationships, radically diverging from the original version by the Brothers Grimm. The original version underscores a patriarchal narrative where Gretel’s role is secondary and reactive, relying on Hansel’s guidance and protection. Women are portrayed in negative, antagonistic roles, from the cruel stepmother to the witch, reinforcing societal stereotypes of women as either fragile victims or dangerous threats. In contrast, Murphy reimagines Gretel as an empowered, independent figure, challenging male authority and societal expectations. Her decisions, agency, and strength redefine her role, not as a passive follower but as a decisive and self-reliant protagonist. This transformation symbolizes a broader critique of patriarchal values, emphasizing the need for equal power dynamics without undermining male characters.

Murphy’s retelling further explores the complexity of female relationships and identities, introducing solidarity and depth absent in the original. The queer relationship between Gretel and Maeve defies heteronormative conventions, presenting a progressive view of love and partnership. Maeve, initially suspected as a witch, is revealed as compassionate and humane, challenging societal prejudices and stereotypes. This inclusion of a same-sex relationship underscores the narrative’s focus on breaking away from traditional gender and sexual norms. By shifting the lens from competition and marginalization to empowerment and mutual support, Murphy’s story not only redefines the roles of women but also critiques the structures that

perpetuate their oppression. Together, these elements present a reimagined Gretel as a symbol of modern feminist ideals, where women assert their autonomy, challenge patriarchal constructs, and embrace diverse forms of identity and connection.

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