

The Castle That Ate Cinderella

Every little girl knows how the story ends. The prince finds Cinderella. The glass slipper fits. The wedding bells ring. The castle gates open.

And then, mercifully, the story stops.

Because fairy tales have always known where to end. They end before the difficult questions begin. They end before Cinderella learns that belonging often comes with conditions. Before she discovers that every kingdom has rules. Before she realizes that acceptance is sometimes offered in exchange for pieces of herself.

No one asks whether she missed the girl who once danced barefoot in the ashes. No one asks whether the castle loved Cinderella, or merely the version of Cinderella it found acceptable.

Perhaps that is why fairy tales end at the wedding. Because if they continued, they would have to tell a different story.

A story about women who spend years learning how to belong.

A story about women who mistake self-erasure for love.

A story about women who become so skilled at adjusting that they wake up one day unable to remember where they end and everyone else's expectations begin.

This is not Cinderella's story.

This is ours.

Every fairy tale teaches girls how to enter the castle.

Be kind. Be patient. Be desirable. Be chosen.

Very few teach them how to survive the castle once the gates close behind them.

Very few teach them what to do when belonging begins to demand transformation.

Very few teach them how to remain themselves in a kingdom that rewards conformity and calls it love.

The castle does not devour Cinderella all at once.

It teaches her new codes.

At first, the changes seem harmless.

Speak a little softer. Don't react. Choose your battles. Let it go. Be the bigger person.

Soon, Cinderella becomes fluent in a language she never consciously chose to learn.

Scholars call it code-switching—the practice of altering one's language, behaviour, personality, or identity to fit a particular social environment.

Women know it by another name.

Adjustment.

The daughter who once spoke without hesitation learns to measure every sentence. The woman who once expressed anger learns to disguise it as patience. The dreamer learns practicality. The rebel learns diplomacy. The individual learns performance.

And like all successful performances, it becomes so convincing that eventually even she forgets she is acting.

The greatest tragedy is not that others fail to recognize her.

It is that she begins to lose sight of herself.

The tragedy is that the gatekeepers of this kingdom are often women themselves—women who know the ache of shrinking, yet ask the next generation to shrink a little more. Women who inherited the architecture of patriarchy and became its most devoted caretakers.

Perhaps this is why women across centuries have written so passionately about freedom.

Virginia Woolf wrote that women need a room of one's own. Not merely a room with walls and windows, but a psychological space untouched by constant judgment and performance.

Sylvia Plath wrote of suffocation long before we learned the language of emotional labour. Not the dramatic suffocations that make headlines, but the quieter ones—the shrinking of ambition, the swallowing of words, the exhaustion of constantly becoming what others need you to be.

Kabir questioned rituals that lacked compassion. What use are customs, traditions, and performances of virtue if humanity is absent?

Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi reminds us that the deepest violence is often the attempt to strip a person of dignity and identity—and the greatest resistance is refusing to surrender either.

Across centuries, across languages, across cultures, these writers were asking the same question:

What does it cost a human being to become acceptable?

Women know the answer.

We have been paying for belonging with pieces of ourselves for generations.

Homi Bhabha called it mimicry.

The colonized subject was encouraged to become almost the same, but never quite.

How familiar this feels to women.

The daughter-in-law is welcomed as a daughter, in theory, yet quietly reminded of the difference. She is invited to belong, but only through adaptation. She learns new customs, new codes, new loyalties, and new silences.

The kingdom applauds her transformation while the promise of complete acceptance remains forever just out of reach.

What struck me most in Bhabha's work was the idea that colonization is not merely about controlling land. It is about controlling narratives. It is about deciding whose version of reality matters.

Colonization succeeds when the colonized begin to police themselves.

Patriarchy succeeds when women begin doing the same.

With every “Don’t make a big issue out of it,” every “You need to adjust,” every “That’s just how this family is,” women learn to question their own experience before they question the system surrounding them.

Their reality becomes negotiable.

Their feelings become secondary.

Their voice becomes something that requires permission.

And yet, like every colonized people in history, they resist.

Sometimes resistance is loud. Sometimes it is quiet.

Sometimes it is pursuing education after marriage.

Sometimes it is earning an income.

Sometimes it is setting boundaries.

Sometimes it is simply saying, “This hurts me,” when everyone else expects silence.

The struggle was never truly between men and women.

It was always about power.

About who gets to define reality. Whose comfort is prioritized. Whose sacrifices are normalized. Whose voice is heard.

Perhaps the freedom women seek today is not freedom from family. Not freedom from marriage. Not freedom from love.

But freedom to remain fully themselves within it.

To belong without disappearing.

To love without surrendering identity.

To compromise without self-erasure.

We taught Cinderella how to find the castle.

Perhaps the task before this generation is different.

Perhaps we must teach her how to enter it without leaving herself at the gate.

Because if belonging demands transformation, silence, performance, and self-erasure—

was it ever belonging at all?