

Disney Princess Movies' Development and Dilemmas

— From a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to critically analyze the image of Disney princesses using a feminist perspective. The study aims to explore the positive and negative impacts of the image of princesses and how it has influenced film making as social mores have changed and women's liberation has been promoted. The study explores the ways in which women have been portrayed throughout history through exhaustive case studies, demonstrating how princesses have changed in response to the times in which they have been portrayed. This study recognizes that while significant progress has been made in portraying princesses as more autonomous and powerful, prejudices and fundamental limitations remain. By examining these issues, this study seeks to reveal that the image of the princess still needs to be improved to better align with modern feminist values. It also calls on Disney to be brave enough to break out of the current image of princesses as well as the storytelling framework, and to explore more possibilities in female characters

Keywords: Disney princess film, Feminism, feminist movement, Characterization

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, Disney Princess movies are clearly an integral part of Disney's many IP. Their role as a popular form of media plays an important role in influencing the gender perceptions and value formation of young viewers. However, these films are also often criticized for their limitations as well as crippling in terms of gender roles and portrayal of women regardless of the era. Therefore, it is of great significance to explore the development of Disney Princess movies and the dilemmas that cannot be broken through from a feminist perspective.

First, It is initial to review the origins of the Disney Princess movie. The history of Disney Princess movies can be traced back to 1937's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which laid the foundation of Disney Princess movies, that is, the innocent and kind-hearted Princess, after going through a series of persecution by villains such as her stepmother and the witch, meets her true love, the Prince, who solves her predicament and then leads a happily-ever-after life with him. And it became a template for later movie making. Over time, Disney Princess movies have undergone many adaptations and innovations, from the traditional templates of *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* to the modern, less template in subject matter *Frozen* and *Brave Legend*, each presenting a unique style and storyline in a different era.

However, despite the huge success of the Disney Princess movies in the entertainment market, they have also been criticized from feminists. These criticisms focus on gender roles and the portrayal of women. Looking at several classic films, Disney princesses are often portrayed as weak, passive and dependent, needing rescue or relying on a prince to achieve happiness. In addition, their body image is often overemphasized.

Based on the above background and issues, this paper aims to delve into the development of Disney Princess movies and the limitations that exist in them from a feminist perspective. By analyzing the images of female characters presented in Disney Princess movies, the characteristics of gender role portrayal, body image and emotional expression will be clear. At the same time, it is also important to the atmosphere connection of the time period under these images, especially what influence the era has on its princess portrayal. Through the study of Disney Princess films, there will have insight into their development trajectory and propose implications for film creation and audience education in order to promote the dissemination and practice of gender equality and feminist values.

In order to achieve this goal, this paper will use the methods of literature analysis and case study, combined with feminist theories, to conduct a comprehensive study on the development and dilemmas of Disney Princess movies. Finally, It is necessary to make some recommendations to promote the development of Disney Princess movies in terms of gender equality and feminist awareness to better meet the needs of modern audiences. Through this study, it will provide useful references for the creation and audience education of Disney Princess movies and to promote the practice of gender equality and feminist values in the entertainment industry.

2. Literature Review

There was a complex relationship between Disney's representations of women in the 1990s and post-feminist ideology and Historic appearance of the Disney female in relation to the women's movements. Additionally, understanding the historic appearance of the Disney female in relation to the women's movements provides further insight into this relationship[1]. In other words, Contradictory messages still found in Disney princess movies, including harmful body types and narrow ideals of marriage[2]. The issue that traditional Disney princess film such as *Cinderella* are movies that explore different aspects of how the feminine self is created. Questions regarding self, relationships, power, and voice are formed using feminist theory from a standpoint and feminist scholarship on the psychological growth of the ideal girl. Disney's interpretations of children's literature and history continue to be those of a white, middle-class, patriarchal society, despite the fact that heroines in some of the later films have voice and a sense of self[3].

On top of that, other aspect of the impact of princess movies as a medium on children and adolescents. Because of the rise of feminism at different times, Forcing businesses and media organizations, especially those targeting young female consumers, to be aware of and even publicize gender issues related to the marketing of their products, services and brands[3].

During the period from 1820-1860, before the Second Wave of Feminism, responding to rapidly growing population, expanding frontiers and industrial developments, The movement known as the "cult of true womanhood," existed[4]. This cultural system, which is characterized by the idea that women should stay at home and respect the primary principles of purity and submission, stifles intellectual and personal pursuits. Under this system, women are completely dependent on their husbands for protection, and the ultimate happy ending revolves around marriage. This cultural romantic of family life was absorbed by the storylines of Disney's classic animated films . In order to realize the fairy tale romance and subsequently achieve happiness, the princess, like the housewife , must first and foremost lack autonomy and typify superficial, passive beauty[5]. The second wave began in the 1960s and continued into the 1990s. It began to link the subjugation of women to a broader critique of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and women's roles as wives and

mothers. It also challenged the old "cult of family life"[1]. In order to attract a more modern target audience and build an image of "Girls' Generation for its time". The classic Disney princesses have been abandoned for their simplistic characterization and romantic narratives. The rise of third-wave feminism paralleled the more complex princess stories of the period [5]. The emerging fourth wave is booming[4]. Disney in addition to advocating for women to break away from stereotypes in the present, princesses are also beginning to display more power, autonomy, and other traditionally masculine traits. However, remnants of the patriarchal past are still present in the story lines of modern princesses, reflecting the norms that persist in contemporary society[5].

The simple truth that men and women have different everyday experiences is one that is frequently ignored. Social theorists have, however, persisted in presenting a worldview that is primarily focused on men for a very long period. The feminist perspective, in contrast to the conventional social perspective, stresses social concerns that are frequently disregarded or incorrectly classified by current social theories. Using conflict theory, it also examines how gender norms and disparities are reinforced. The purpose of feminist ideas, which range widely and each have their own unique perspectives, is to address gender inequity[6].

3. Disney Princess Film And Their Heroines

Disney Princess movies are an offshoot of Disney movies, which specifically refer to movies in which a princess character is the heroine. In general, these princess heroines can be divided into two parts: traditional princesses and new princesses. Their development can also be roughly divided into three main periods: the Classical Era, the Renaissance Era, and the New Era[7].

3.1. Classic Times Princess(1937-1959) - Before the Waves of Feminism

In the early classical era of Disney, the image of princess heroines presented in princess movies was almost gently passive; they were waiting for someone to come and save them[7]. In other words, they perfectly represented the stereotypical standards that patriarchal society held for women at that time, before feminism had risen to prominence[8].

Much of this is due to the context of the time period. In the early industrialized United States, the family economy was the dominant economic model[9]. Men worked outside the home to earn the family income, while women took care of the home and children. This family economy model limited women's employment opportunities. Women's educational and career opportunities were limited. Many females do not have access to higher education and are limited to basic education. In addition, there is gender discrimination against women in many occupational fields, which limits their employment opportunities. And, in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, marriage was seen as a woman's primary goal and duty[10]. Women lost their independent legal status in marriage under the law, including the loss of property rights and the right to vote. These constraints made it difficult for women to pursue their careers and live independently.

One of the central points of the classic *Snow White* example is that in a male-dominated society, it seems to be one of the most important things for women to maintain a good appearance, and even the standards of good appearance are not up to women to decide. In the *Snow White* story, Snow White's dark hair, white skin and cherry-like mouth are the standards of beauty. It is also set up that the evil queen wants to persecute the life of the princess for the stupid reason of competing for the most beautiful woman in the world, but the princess is still pardoned and helped by her beauty time and time again at the moment of life and death. If a male protagonist had been in the same situation, the movie plot would never have been set up in such a way.

The *Snow White* movie also signaled the traditional division of social roles between men and women at the time. At the time, the cult of womanhood was popular in the real world, according to

which a "true woman" should possess four basic virtues: piety, purity, domesticity and obedience. This idea revolved around the woman as the center of the family. She is considered the "light of the family". Snow White, who also follows this trend, naturally takes on the job of cooking and cleaning for the dwarfs after they rescue her. The dwarfs, on the other hand, take on the job of mining[8]. The division of labor alludes to the fact that most of the women at that time were housewives, while most of the men worked outside the home. Without the protection and financial support of men, it was difficult for them to survive.

Finally the general submissive behavior of women at the time and the way they treated men can also be seen in the way Snow White treats the prince who saves her. The prince ordered Snow White to become his wife after saving her life, and of course Snow White dutifully obeyed. The story ends abruptly with the prince and princess living happily ever after. It makes people default to the idea that the princess's married life is just as sweet and cozy. It also implies that women at that time seemed to think that if they were docile, men would surely give them the life they wanted.

Sleeping Beauty and *Cinderella* from the same time period follow the same path in terms of plotting and characterization. The common denominator is the male savior, and Cinderella's marriage to the prince savior seems to be the only way for her to escape her stepmother's persecution. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the prince kills the dragon that holds Aurora captive and finally wakes up the princess with a "true love's kiss". The happy ending for the princess seems to be all about the prince's "true love" in Disney's setting, while the princess herself is flattened or even ignored.[6]

In general, the image of the princess during this period carries with it many of the perverse stereotypes that women of the time were expected to conform to, and the social expectation that the "pure and beautiful" woman would be rewarded with a perfect married life.

3.2. The Princess Renaissance and the Wave of Female Rebellion

Diverse minority women's organizations worldwide had a rise in self-awareness beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the 1990s. In contrast to the previous phase of the revolution, this one drew women of color and those from poor nations who were looking for sisterhood and solidarity and who believed that "women's struggle is a class struggle." Women were seen by feminists as a social class, and they tried to demonstrate the connection between racial, economic, and gender oppression by using words like "the personal is political" and "identity politics" They started targeted initiatives to eradicate sexism across society, from the lowest levels of government to children's cartoons.

After the end of the Second World War, many countries experienced social, economic and cultural changes. During the war, many women participated in work and social activities, demonstrating their abilities and talents. This led to a rethinking of the status and power of women and a redefinition of their role in society[1].

Following this wave, Disney's unprecedented launch of Pocahontas' as a representation of a handful of Native American princesses has controversial points: the princess still unfolds the main line in its story with love, rather than on her leadership and courage. And the man is an Englishman. Combined with the history of Britain's colonization of South America, the film certainly fails to project a feminist image.

On other hand, Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* is certainly portrayed more successfully and anti-stereotypically from a feminist perspective. She rejects the advances of her suitors, and there is no male savior when her father is captured in a dungeon is she herself travels to free him. Also a bit of a major breakthrough is the male lead - Beast, who in this movie presents a subversive portrayal of a domestic violence abuser from the past. He shows the typical abuser behavior of yelling and holding Belle captive. The fact that "women are subject to domestic violence" is brought to the forefront, which coincides with the second to third wave of new feminism, which emphasizes the unfairness and even violence that women receive in society and in the family[5].

3.3. New Age Princesses and the Wave of Feminism That Continues to nowadays

The wave of feminism that began in the mid-nineties and has continued to evolve to the present emphasizes strong and empowering gestures and defines female beauty as a subject rather than an object of sexist patriarchy. Many tend to believe that gender already has the possibility of achieving equality or that society is providing them with equal rights.

As a result, Disney directors have become more inclined to show the female strength of the princesses, and in addition to advocating for women to break free from stereotypes, the princesses have begun to display more power, autonomy, and other traditionally masculine traits. Stories also began to shift away from love as the main focus to family, friendship, self-redemption, and fulfillment. For example, Merida in "*Legends of Courage*" is good at archery and loves adventure, but has a mother who wants her to marry as soon as possible. The story focuses on her and her mother's initial argument, an accident, and a final reconciliation. The entire story is dominated by female characters. Then again, *Frozen* is centered around the adventures of Elsa and Anna and their bonding threads, and the introduction gives both characters the role of rulers of a country, rather than a male gaining power[5].

However, remnants of the patriarchal past are still present in the storyline of the modern princess. From a business standpoint, Disney has to make outwardly glamorous images of princesses in order for the movie to have high box office, and high sales of peripheral products. However, in the case of Elsa, her prettiness is placed in the context of the overall story and who she is, and does not preclude a dress code that is limited to the male gaze with two-eyed makeup and tight dresses. The princess's beautiful appearance also invites the questioning or indoctrination of the idea that women's beauty is a necessity[7].

4. Conclusion

Looking at the 100-year development of Disney princesses, the image of princesses has evolved from a romanticized and submissive image to a reinvention of the princess as a passionate, courageous role model who is able to control her own unique destiny. Saviors and stereotypes of ladies are no longer prerequisites for the success of any princess. But there is still valuable room for change, such as the fact that women of color should be portrayed in a way that is respectful and true to their culture. For example, there could be an emphasis on the "beauty" of the princess, which would allow standards to manipulate a young woman, consciously or unconsciously, at a time when she is at her most sensitive so that she sees her body through a purely sexualize lens[3]. Overall, with the passage of time and the continued advocacy of the feminist movement, there is still potential for future Disney films to keep up with feminism, and perhaps in the future, instead of sticking to the Princess as the traditional protagonist, they could portray or explore other Disney female characters and stories.

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