Disney's Female Protagonists: Their Connotation with Modern Culture

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Abstract

The entertainment industry in America and around the world owes a lot to the Disney animation and their movies. They have a great impact on children through many ways, not only through movies, but also through games, toys, accessories, and clothing. Disney's presence has been around for more than 80 years, and during that period, they have performed a pivotal role in how our society showcases gender roles. Disney has evolved with our society as modern culture passes through various changes. Over the years its female characters have also evolved. The actual interpretation of Disney princesses is the hackneyed damsel's anguish and very ordinary. This can be witnessed through Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty. Another portrayal switched the roles of female protagonists as mutinous and go-getting. This can be seen through the characters of Rapunzel, Ariel, and Mulan. In the final phase, the female characters are shown as self-reliant and freedom loving. This kind of delineation can be seen through Anna, Merida, and Elsa. Disney is seen as a reflection of changing culture and changing times.

Keywords: Disney, Female Characters, Culture, and Society.

The captivating world of Disney was created by a man named Walt Disney which revolutionized the manner in which fairy tales were told. Various stories of fairies and princesses have been a part of our lives for over 80 years. The man who initiated this project of animated world became an undisputed leader in this business. Gender portrayal and their connotations represent society in a big way. In this media plays a substantial role and influence the society and various social norms. Disney is a great illustration and representation of numerous cultural trends and developments. It has progressed along with the culture and has witnessed different challenges of each era. .

The time and culture this world lives in rotates around technology, advertising, and different forms of media consisting of music, video games, movies, and television. The younger generation has grown up with this kind of lifestyle and the impact which television alone has become one of life's most requisite facets. However, entertainment

shown on the television is not bonafide, still some children believe it is and begin to compare themselves to the characters on the television soaps and the kind of life they showcase. According to Gardner:"Certain attitudes and behaviours are associated with a specific identities or stereotypes. Our society tends to outline what it means to be a male or female, and then define what depictions and traits of normal behaviour they are each to portray" (32). The role of women has seen a substantial change with the modifying times. The early thirties in the United States was defining era because of a universal economic depression. This situation in a way affected the position of women in society where earlier they were meant to be at home caring for their husbands and children and subsequently they started fighting for equality and began to challenge the traditional standards of the society.

In 1937, *SnowWhite and the Seven Dwarfs*, a Disney animated movie was released. Through the lively music, jovial characters, and happy ending, the character Snow White commences the Disney trend of homely woman who becomes a beauty in despair longing for the prince to come and save her. She is made to do all household chores that consist of cooking, cleaning, and being a mother figure for those seven dwarfs.The image that Snow White was representing was only to underline the belief of women being home-makers. During World War II, there was a change with many women taking up work because men were entering into the war to fulfil military demands, more than a few women took up manufacturing jobs to help the economy to recover. With war coming to an end, women supposedly returned to the kitchens as men were seen as the sole bread winner for the family, while women were given the duty of domestic caregivers caring for the children and home.

In 1950, the movie *Cinderella* was released, and was again based from another Brothers Grimm tale. The story of Cinderella was not the usual media corroboration of gender roles that was as obvious as other during the 1950s. There were a lot of pressures that were originating from culture created gender roles, where a woman had to do home cleaning and cooking while making everybody except herself happy. Cinderella was stuck in her imposed enslavement for a major part of her life until marriage became a means of her escape. Another Disney movie released during the 1950s era was that of *Sleeping Beauty*. The film was released in 1959 and like the previous two stories followed the same story of a princess who hopelessly falls into a curse and the only way to be rescued is by "true love's kiss". This stereotyped thinking that women

are feeble and unable to do their own saving, is again showcased in this movie.

The late 1960s and early 1970s created the opportunity for an air of change and the second wave of feminist movement where women are challenging the social views of gender roles, came into being. The culture was changing and reshaping the role of women in the society. After a long stretch of subjugation at the hands of patriarchal society, the era of 1960s infused strength and determination by women asking for equality in every field. Various laws came into existence to give women freedom to work without being harassed or exploited at the workplace. With all this moving in the surrounding culture, Disney also began to make changes in their princess movies. The first movie that was released in this phase was Disney's *The Little Mermaid* in 1989 with Ariel starting the trend for a girl to step outside of the cage designed for the archetypal princess. Ariel was the first to sing and talk about her own desires and choices. Like Ariel, Mulan from *Mulan*was also a brave and self-reliant girl who shatters her marked out gender role to follow her own path. She chops her hair, dresses like a man, and fights in her father's place for which she is caught and even killed. The last movie in this type is *Tangled*. This movie was released in 2010, talks about a girl trapped in a tower. Rapunzel had a great love for adventure and

wanted to leave the tower, but could not escape until she meets Flynn Rider, a bandit; she stands up and escapes from the place. She becomes a symbol of girl power with a rebellious touch.

The society changed more during the 1930s. In 2012, for the first time, Disney carved a princess's story that entirely broke prototypes and pigeonholes of all female characters that came before her. With the release of *Brave*, Disney showed the audiences that a princess does not need a man or marriage for happiness. In *Brave*, Merida, who is clever, independent, and determined girl refuses to bow down and continues to be on her own. Another movie, called *Frozen*, which released in 2013, described the free spiritedness of two strong protagonists, Princess Anna and Queen Elsa, for the very first time in the history of Disney. The story brings out the importance of family and sister relationships. Anna does not depend on a man to go and rescue her sibling, and in fact she tells the prince perusing her hand for marriage to wait for her and tend for the people. The movie was a colossal shift from the *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs*. Through *Frozen* and *Brave*, Disney showed that women can manage their lives and destinies well.

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