

The Transformation of Female Images in Disney Animated Films from the 20th to the 21st Century in the Context of the American Feminist Movement

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ABSTRACT

The American feminist movement has experienced three waves of movement since its outbreak in the mid-19th century. Its influence has continued to impact the norms of patriarchal society and has had a huge impact on the development of the film industry. Disney, one of the giants of the animation world, produced a series of films portraying princesses. As a mirror of the social and contemporary context, Disney reflected the image of women in different periods of the feminist movement through its animated films. This paper will analyse the representative Disney princess animations during the three waves through an observational method in the context of the feminist movement in the United States, in an attempt to construct the changes in the image of Disney princesses from the 20th to the 21st century, and thus explore the awakening and development of women's consciousness.

Keywords: *Disney Films, American Feminist Movement, Female Image*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1920s, Walter Disney founded The Walt Disney Company and started making the first silent movies, then black and white, till colored movies became a reality since the 1980s. Starting with “*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*” made in 1937, Disney has produced over 120 featured films with another dozen in production [1]. During its development, Disney Films successively acquired independent film giant Miramax, 3D animation leader Pixar, other animation giants such as Marvel and Lucasfilm. They consolidated its position as a top film company [2].

The film is a mirror of the concurrent social culture and fashion [3]. Although fairy tales are almost always written by adults, reflecting the psychological needs and thinking patterns that come out are actually the thinking and value judgments of adults. However, Disney's animations have always been characterized by the pursuit of audiences of all ages and have been avoiding the “juvenile” label. Their animation works strive to show rich connotations and can adapt to people's common social concepts [2]. It is fair to say most people who have

access to cinema and television have watched Disney movies, past, present, and future. With such a large audience base, gender portrayal in Disney cartoons will inevitably shape how people perceive women in society.

The unprecedented popularity of *Snow White* has made the “princess movie” an integral part of Disney films ever since. The traditional image of a princess is that of a princess from an illustrious family, elegant and dignified. At the same time, this is not the case with the female characters in Disney's animated series. The female characters in the films are officially given the status of “princesses” by Disney. But some of them are princesses through marriage to princes, such as *Belle* (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991) and some are girls of tribal origin, such as *Moana* (*Moana*, 2016).

In addition to this, the portrayal of the different princesses varies considerably. Most of the females in early Disney animation were portrayed as falling in love with a prince or being inseparable from their family bonds. Such as *Snow White* and *Cinderella* (*Cinderella*, 1950). Later on, female figures emerged who began to take the initiative. By now, females in Disney films show

a more independent and courageous side, such as *Merida* (*Brave*, 2012), who fights against tradition, and *Raya* (*Raya and The Last Dragon*, 2021), who saves the whole world.

There is no denying that cinema is a projection of society. Therefore, another notable factor in exploring the transformation of women in Disney animation is the feminist movement in the United States. The feminist movement, also known as the women's liberation movement or the women's movement, is a social goal or a social movement that opposes discrimination against women, gives women their rightful place in society, and changes the traditional prejudices and habits of patriarchal thinking, discrimination, and exploitation of women that are prevalent in society, and gradually achieves full equality of rights between the sexes. The phased process of this movement has, to some extent, influenced the presentation of women in the American film industry. It has certainly influenced the portrayal of women in animated films.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the world's leading animated film companies, Disney Animation has produced numerous animations that reflect gender issues since its inception. Many scholars have analysed and researched the female characters in Disney animation. Disney animated films have been branded with the ideology of different generations. They reflect social changes as a barometer of social development and represent the American cultural imagination [2]. From the very early times of the Disney animations, we can see that representation of women was always within the frame of gender bias [4]. The focus at that time was on the portrayal of a kind and innocent females, such as the most iconic *Snow White*. The female characters come from different backgrounds and families, but what they all have in common are their innocence and good looks. And it is these characteristics that help them to overcome difficulties and achieve their own happiness [5]. Meanwhile, the male gaze is also manifested in those earlier Disney films in the 20th century by portraying men as strong and capable heroes. Out of their strong ability to rescue and transform women, they obtain their romantic partner at the movie's end [4,7]. That is to say, females in early Disney animation have been portrayed as helpless people in a position of absolute vulnerability, whose only chance of being rescued is to be helped by a prince [6]. However, since the new century, Disney has changed its approach to storytelling and given the film a deeper meaning by keeping up with the times [8]. The portrayal of women in Disney animation has changed significantly compared to the previous century. In the new century of Disney animation, female characters are more gender-aware and show independence and individuality. In recent years, female characters have been shown to be almost more

important than men, with the male gaze gradually being replaced by the female narrative perspective [9].

In addition to the analysis regarding the portrayal of the characters in the film, another closely related influence is the social and cultural context of the United States, namely the USA feminist movement. The American feminist movement was all about completing the image of "womanhood". It can be divided into three phases in terms of time. The first was between 1840 and 1925, a period in which much opposition emerged. The traditional gender role norms for women were not fundamentally changed. The second. From 1963 to the end of the 1980s, the second was more targeted and broader in scope than the first movement. It led to an improvement in the status of women in many ways, but still without breaking through the framework of heterosexual patriarchy. The third movement erupted at the end of the 1990s and continues to nowadays [10]. This time the movement has become more focused on individuality and diversity. With the development of the feminist movement and the emancipation of women's consciousness, people's values have changed. Audiences are no longer attracted to the image of tender princesses and their love stories with princes. Still, they are more interested in seeing films in which females are free from the constraints of masculinity and sexism and are can transcend themselves and become brave and independent [11].

These studies help us to understand some of the film's content and background information. However, there still exist some research gaps. We found that all these studies are still in the past years. Whereas Disney has released many more animated films in recent years that reflect the image of women, there is no doubt that the latest Disney animations have not been included in previous studies. Meanwhile, the study of the image of women, both at home and abroad, is mostly related to politics, sociology, psychology, literature, etc. Occasionally, the characteristics of female characters have been analysed from the perspective of film and television, but mostly as a case study, focusing on a particular film at a particular point in time, and most of the films analysed are live-action films. There are few macroscopic considerations of the changing problems of female characters in animated films over a complete time period. This paper will use the Disney animated film series and contextualize the USA feminist movement. Showing the transformation of women in Disney animation from the 20th century to the 21st century helps individuals to see how the image of females has shifted over time in the context of gender issues, and the before and after comparisons lead to a more intuitive understanding. In order to achieve the expected purposes. This research will analyse the image and causes of iconic Disney female characters from the 20th to the 21st century through a qualitative method to achieve the expected purposes.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1. *Female attached to male*

The first wave of feminism marked its ending in 1920 as women were granted the right to vote after years of feminist struggle. When Disney adopted the 1912 Germanic fairytale from the Grim brother into the 1937 “*The Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*”, America was experiencing one of the greatest depressions in history. The financial crisis in American families forced women to find jobs. It started to take on more non-domestic responsibilities [12]. Before this period, women in society were regarded as the “glue” of the family and were not concerned too much about financial responsibility.

In the period between the end of the first movement wave and the start of the second wave, Disney released three animated princess films, namely *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. While these movies remain significant as it shows societal acceptance towards women had grown following the first feminist movement. However, the presentation of the female image in these films was subjected to public opinion as to the major female characters in these films kept within the “womens realm,” suggesting the feminine standards generally accepted by society [13]. In this regard, these female characters were presented as pious, pure, and not resistive towards difficulties. It can be noticed that these films rather followed how female characters were conventionally portrayed as princess stereotypes in fairy tales with qualities like “fortune, beauty, prince salvation,” etc., suggesting the best personality for a female representation, to the audience [13,14]. Moreover, the portrayal of this perfect female image however indicates the influence of patriarchal imaginations on the cultural mechanism, which considers the female image with traits such as “beautiful but weak personality” [14].

In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, even though we see a nurturing and leadership image of the beautiful *Snow White*, it was within the “strong men and weak women” framework [13]. It can be noticed that *Snow White* is resurrected through the kiss of love by the Prince. Similarly, *Aurora* in *Sleeping Beauty* is awakened by the love kiss of the prince. In the other movie, *Cinderella* marrying the prince is the final solution for *Cinderella* to get rid of the tragic situation she is in. All these three animation films present the men as heroes that save the female princess, while the resistance and independent spirits of the princesses were weak. The trace resistance seen in *Cinderella* is completely stifled in *Sleeping Beauty*. This presentation of the weak women image rather indicates how these movies engage in the unconscious representations of the patriarchy that prevailed during that time, wherein the image of men was always conceived as the savior and the women as need to

be saved by men. These observations also affirm how women and men were valued by the societal expectations of that time, and the constraints and requirements prevalent for presenting female characters [13].

Overall, during this period between the first and second waves of feminism, those princess movies discussed still reflect the traditional standard and stereotype for what is to be a “good woman” in the eyes of society.

3.2. *Self-awareness awakening*

The second wave of the feminist movement in American History broke out in the late 1960s. The feminists of the second-wave movement called for equal rights for women, including equality in education and equality in work. The ultimate goal was to gain equal status with men and economical as well as sexual independence. The creation of female protagonists in Disney animation changed significantly as a result. Rather than passively accepting fate and waiting for help, female characters who began to rebel emerged during this period.

In 1989, Disney launched the “*Little Mermaid*” adapted from Andersen’s fairy tale “*Daughter of the Sea*”. This is the first princess to have her own dream in a Disney animation. Princess *Ariel*’s dream is to go to the land where humans live. This dream is unrealistic for the many sea creatures that depend on water to live, and no doubt *Ariel* is strongly opposed and obstructed by her father. But unlike the three previous princesses who were always forced to accept and submit, *Ariel* relies on her own efforts to achieve her dream. *Ariel* is shown as a new feminist spirit, never presented by a female character before in any Disney animations, as a rebellious, ordinary adolescent girl who ends up exchanging her beautiful voice with the human form to pursue her love of life.

Besides that, *Ariel*’s father is completely against her dreams and the love she wants to pursue, using magic to destroy the human objects and statues of princes that *Ariel* has collected. Indeed, it symbolises the continued suppression of women’s attempts to take control of their own destiny and break away from the traditional “feminine sphere” of patriarchal society in society at the time. But *Ariel*’s act against her father’s wishes was a manifestation of feminist opposition to male authority in the social milieu of the time. In addition to the awakening of female consciousness, it is also symbolic of women’s desire to be free from the confines of the family.

In short, the *Little Mermaid* by Disney reveals the courage, independence, strength, and justice of women by creating the image of a woman who is loyal to her heart, self, ideals as someone brave enough to express herself. With the representation of the strong character of *Ariel* in *Little Mermaid*, Disney was trying to get rid of the early depictions of women characters in their

animations as passive, weak, and dependent [14]. Moreover, Disney was able to present the new princess model suitable to the changes in time, influenced by the second wave of feminism, as a character breaking away from female convention images as someone independent, yearning for a free life with a rebellious nature and most importantly, a feminine spirit suggests the awakening of a strong female consciousness. Moreover, the character of *Ariel* can also be seen as an attribute to the efforts of feminists of that time. In this regard, *Ariel* represents the women who strive against oppression into coming out of the “female status” as free and independent women who stand for themselves [12, 15].

Unfortunately, the ending of *Little Beauty* does not escape the happy ending of “the prince and the princess live happily ever after”. To some extent, this reflects the social situation of the time, when the meaning of the feminist movement was still being questioned and opposed, and feminists were at a loss. But there is no denying that the second wave of the feminist movement still had a huge impact on changing the status and consciousness of women. Since then, the females in Disney animation have all shown their different energies and characteristics, and are no longer completely passive and perfect like the three princesses during the first wave of the feminist movement.

3.3. Determined in the pursuit of self-worth

After the 1980s, “feminism” and “postcolonialism”, two discourses that had received little attention in academic circles, were discussed together, resulting in an unprecedented “postcolonial feminism” [16]. In the 1990s the American feminist movement entered its third wave of development. During this third wave, the term “feminist” became more inclusive, focusing on the diversity and individuality of women, believing that women were different in many ways, including race, class, sexual orientation, body image, etc. [17]. They focused on how to speak out for women as a whole while acknowledging so many differences. According to Amy Schriefer (n.d.), the third wave tended to emphasise the differences between individuals and centred the movement on this. In addition to this, they reassessed the activism of the second wave and shifted the focus to embrace all people in all situations. The third wave sought all voices, especially those that had been silenced in the past [18].

In 1995, Disney released the film *Pocahontas*. Instead of the lean and delicate figure of the previous princesses, *Pocahontas* was portrayed as a stout and athletic figure. As well as being very different in appearance from previous princesses, *Pocahontas* is also the first princess to give up love for her ideals. At the end of the film, *Pocahontas*' lover is injured and needs to travel to London for treatment. When her lover asks her to come along, *Pocahontas* refuses and stays with her tribe. She

also rejects the marriage arranged by her father and the fact that love is no longer the focus of her life is a complete departure from the Disney tradition of “living happily ever after”, signifying that she has all the power to control her own behaviour, and illustrating the impact of social movements on women’s values at the time, namely that love was no longer the only pursuit for women, which was “a bold attempt by Disney’s heroine [18].”

In 1998, Disney featured the first-ever Chinese princess, *Hua Mulan*. A complete “tomboy”, *Hua Mulan* resisted ancient China’s traditional norms and constraints, where women were strictly required to be demure and were resistant to the marriage. She rejected the notion that women had to marry well and stay at home to run the household and chose to join the army in her father’s stead. By constantly training in the military camp and fighting the enemy on the battlefield, she proved that even what society generally believed only men could accomplish could be done by women, and even better, and was eventually recognised by the emperor [19]. *Hua Mulan* shows the unprecedented strength of women, realising the epoch-making significance that women can also build a career and glorify their ancestors, demonstrating women’s self-creation and value, and showing that in the course of the feminist movement, women finally broke through the gender discrimination of being banished from the mainstream culture and began to be put on the social stage on an equal footing with men.

From the Indian girl *Pocahontas* to the Chinese girl *Hua Mulan*, Disney presents girls of different races, colours and classes on the cinema screen, all of whom are no longer beautiful and passive princesses but have their own distinctive personal characteristics, thus showing that the image of the princess becomes individual and diverse. This is inextricably linked to the aforementioned feminist movement of this period, which took greater account of the differences and individuality of women. At the same time, they all showed a stronger sense of self, trying to break away from the traditional rules and take control of their lives. This was a refinement of the activism of the second wave of the movement, just as the women activists of the same period were brave enough to break away from the historical legacy of the male discourse in society and its demands on women.

In the 21st century, women have largely enjoyed equal rights with men [19]. This was the beginning of a new feminist era. The rise of feminism in Disney’s films is closely related to the feminist movement of this period. Women in this period pursued the realisation of their self-worth, no longer valued gaining male approval, and their sense of independence became firm and clear. Everything they did and thought was about being themselves. At the same time, the princesses of 21st century Disney animation have shown themselves to be more capable of being on their own, not only moving away from the fairy

tale of the princess and the prince finally having a perfect love, and they have even gradually abandoned the subject of love. The princesses are symbols of the capability in the film, the examination and exploration of self-growth became the theme of the Disney Princess animated series during this period.

In 2010, Disney released two animated princesses: *The Princess and The Frog* and *Tangled*. *The Princess and The Frog's* Princess *Tiana* is a breakthrough from the previous characteristics and is more in tune with the realities of life, as she is an ordinary waitress who has to work hard every day to earn a living. *Repunzel*, the princess in *Tangled*, wants to escape the confines of the tower and yearns for the outside world, so she continues to learn various skills and even practices martial arts in the tower, eventually achieving her ambition through adventure.

Both *Tiana* and *Repunzel* grow up with a clear goal that they strive for. Love is only a chance event for them, and the appearance of a male protagonist is only an accident. Marriage and family are no longer the only things for them. This is a natural consequence of social progress and the feminist movement [20]. By the end of the story, the heroines have achieved what they have long dreamed of. *Tiana* earns enough money to buy the restaurant she loves and start the business she loves; *Repunzel* sees the landscape she has been waiting for through her adventures. This shows that women have been able to achieve real independence from men in many ways. After centuries of social development and the efforts of feminists, women are finally free from their dependence on men and the need to be saved by them.

By 2012, the princess in *Brave* was completely free of love as a plot point. *Merida* is firmly opposed to her parents' arrangement of tribal marriage and pursues celibacy. Her only claim is to enjoy her own life, shouting at her interfering mother that she wants to be free [21]. It is easy to see that the film reflects a new high point in the development of female independence and that the focus of Disney's film has long since shifted from the relationship between men and women to the relationship between women, with men being excluded from the framework of the film and the main conflict in the development of the story is set within the female community.

Frozen, released in 2013, is by far the highest-grossing animated film of all time [21]. The film had two major breakthroughs. The first was the appearance of a double female protagonist for the first time, and the second was the creation of the first Disney animated queen, *Elsa*, who was at the same time a very conflicted character. *Elsa's* energy is so powerful that her father asks her to hide it because she has hurt her sister by mistake and is afraid that she will hurt others too. *Elsa* initially complies, which demonstrates the power of the father's voice, the most representative of traditional

patriarchal society. However, things don't get any better, as the deliberate hiding of her energy doesn't really conceal it. *Elsa* eventually chooses to leave the castle and unleash herself in the uninhabited mountains, breaking the authority of male discourse. *Elsa* finds her true self in the mountains, free from fear of her energy and the judgement of others, and creates a beautiful ice kingdom. This shows that the oppression of feminists by men actually has obvious drawbacks and sometimes even undesirable consequences. In addition to this, the film continues the *Brave* move away from the topic of love. It revolves around the sisterhood of *Elsa* and her sister, with men playing a secondary role in the film.

In addition to seeking diversity and difference, feminists of this period were also more concerned with constructing the self and women's interaction with society and others. The depth and permanence of these influences are even more evident in Disney's latest animated princess series, the 2021 film *Raya and The Last Dragon*.

Raya and The Last Dragon portrays two unconventional princesses, *Raya* and *Namaari*. *Raya*, clad in a cloak and hat, is a powerful and decisive martial artist whose dark brown skin shows the full wildness of a tribal girl. *Namaari* has a handsome yin and yang haircut and possesses tight muscles. The portrayal of the two princesses once again confirms the core of the third wave of the feminist movement, which focuses on the power of differentiated and diverse women. The absence of *Raya's* father, who is petrified by the forces of evil, actually implies a weakening of male influence on the fate of women. Although *Raya* is initially a devoted follower of her father, it is later on, in her quest for the dragon, that the female sense of self is reinforced and grows.

At the same time, the film gives women a richer character and a more complex mode of dealing with each other. *Namaari* is suspicious, and her mother's strength replaces the male authority prevalent in previous anime. *Raya* grows through trust and betrayal, and after her first unconditional trust in *Namalee* is hurt, she shuts herself away and sets out on a journey of redemption alone. Through her experiences on the road, *Raya* slowly recovers the trust between people, and it is through trust that she can save her tribe. The relationship between the two princesses goes through a complex and tortuous process, from trust to betrayal and finally to trust, re-framing the active involvement of self-consciousness in the process of dealing with female subjects, showing a deeper concern for women, and the wisdom and bravery of *Raya*, the heroine, reflecting the powerful charm of women.

4. CONCLUSION

The development of Disney's animated films from the 20th century to the present reflects the changes in society and the times and the rise of women's status and

the development of their sense of self. The first wave of feminism played a vital role in recognizing women in American society, which led to the making of films during that period focusing on a female lead, but still presenting women as subordinate, to be saved by men. Films released after the second wave of the feminist movement are important for understanding how society's perception of women changed. Unlike the pattern of female characters in Disney animated films after the first feminist movement, this period is significant in representing the feminist spirit of women as independent, rebellious and free. By the time of the third wave of the movement, women characters from different races, classes, sexual orientation, body image, etc. were promoted by Disney in its animation films. The Third Wave of Feminism helped Disney to present the personal stories of women from diverse backgrounds, thus expanding the representation of women and, most importantly, demonstrating that the Third Wave of Feminism has a significant impact on the culture industry today.

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