

Damsels in Distress: A Textual Analysis of Gender roles in Disney Princess Films

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Abstract: *Gender is one of the most discussed topics in today's society. Gender represents and also reproduces certain attributes, expectations and roles which are associated with male and female. Media is the most important resource through which people develop their identities and thereby come to understand the role that gender plays in the actual world. This article is designed to study the gender identity and gender roles in Disney movies and to see how identity is transformed through long term virtues and ideals that are set forth by the Disney movies. It is generally regarded that the Disney movies is unhealthy for children, especially the young girls to watch for the physical, social and behavioral attributes they suggest, conform to the values supporting male dominance. Disney movies are often criticized for their negative, stereotypical portrayal of female characters that are often unrealistically painted. In the context of Disney movies, the word 'woman' has become synonymous with 'victim' in a patriarchal society. The Disney Corporation films such as Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty et al are in the list of favorite Disney heroines for young girls for the last fifty years. These movies have certain themes in common—the female protagonist in each of these films is shown as a “Disney Princess” but the traits of these princesses, featured through these films are submissiveness and servitude. Though they possess divine beauty, these princesses only seem to be capable of suffering in silence, and it is because of this, they are finally given the ultimate reward: salvation through the handsome Prince Charming. This negative portrayals of women and girls in Disney movies gain force through the way in which similar messages are consistently circulated and reproduced in varying degrees in many of the Disney movies even till today. Though both the male and the female roles have changed over time in the Disney princess line, yet the female characters actually exhibits less change in their gender role portrayals and there is no doubt that Disney Corporation is reaching their target audience and their message is continuously being made available to the young children (especially the young girls) around the world.*

Keywords: *consumerism, feminism, femme fatal, patriarchy, stereotype,*

I

Since the dawn of civilizations, there have been stories, folktales that are narrated to children and young people. These stories generally formed the basis of the cartoon characters. These stories were not only a way of consoling and cheering a child, but also of giving lessons to the child about the societal norms of their nation. These are memorized by children and remembered forever. Children idolize their favorite character, the character they have most in common with and are best able identify with, and try to emulate the characters' actions. From these fairy tales kids discover and learn the proper manners and the function they should play in the society. However, this imparting of knowledge through tales can be used to manipulate and brainwash the children. Also the representation of certain group can change the outlook, the behavior and way of thinking of a group. One group that is represented in such a way in fairy tales and cartoon characters are women.

Comic books are not only a source of pleasure, but they also serve as a unique reflection of the culture to which they belong. Comic book characters are usually depicted in visual and contextual extremes. These extremes are representations of how common stereotypes are turned into archetypes and can help us learn about contemporary American social structure because representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent the world meaningfully to other people. It is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. This is clear when we study gender roles, the focus of my research being how women are represented in Disney comics.

From the very early times of the Disney comics it is noticed that the representation of women was always within the frame of gender bias. The ascribed and acquired roles that women typically held such as wife, mother, secretary are nearly duplicated in comic books. A role is usually defined as a set of expectations about the way individuals with certain social identification will most likely act in certain situations. Roles are important in the case of comic book characterization. Unlike the male comic characters, the female characters were usually given very few roles with limited upward mobility. Because of the civil rights movements, second wave feminism and the sexual revolutions, the late 1960s, changed the landscape for women and their comic counterparts.

II

Walt Disney's mother is conspicuously absent from his memories as his younger sister. The elimination of true parents especially the mother, from the comics and the incidence in the films of mothers dead at the start, or dying in course of events or cast as wicked stepmother must have held great personal meaning for Disney. The world of Disney inside and outside the comics is a male one. The Disney organization excludes women from positions of importance. Disney freely admitted "Girls bored me. They still do." [1] There is one sector in Disney society which is beyond the reach of criticism, and is never ousted by lesser creatures: the female. Indeed, she is never challenged because she plays her role to perfection, whether it is humble servant or constantly courted beauty queen; in either case subordinate to male. Her only power is the traditional one of seductress, which she exercises in the form of coquetry. She is denied any further role which might transcend her passive domestic nature.

Women's representation in popular culture facilitates the stereotype of the simple minded, emotional and domesticated female. This is perpetuated through various forms of media including movies, cartoon, comics and television. The term 'women' has become synonymous with the victim in the patriarchal society. Gender is an important topic in today's society. Most people feel pressure to conform to certain stereotypes without really understanding what they are and even without being aware of their influence on our perception. Gender roles are the qualities and characteristics that are considered inherently feminine or masculine. So for example, according to gender stereotypes a women's place is in the home while the man's place is to provide for the family. Many people are also concerned with the portrayal of women and the questionable behavior in the Disney cartoons and comics. Typically women are shown in the position of princess, queen or homemaker.

It's hard to find women featured in those cartoons in the first place, but when they are, they are portrayed as weak, vulnerable or subservient. From Disney movies to comics to cartoon shows, the media's construction of women is everywhere. Thus the portrayal of women in Disney Comic books which has always been the subject of controversy. Sociologists with an interest in gender roles and stereotyping have outlined the role of all women as both supporting characters and potential leaders trying with no success to be accepted as equals.

Even from the early to mid 1900's female Disney cartoon characters were just objects of affection. They are usually helpless when it comes to defending themselves. Sometimes they are nothing more than just decoration. Many of the Disney women character have stereotypical female roles like the housemaids. In most instances they do not have any role but to support the leading male characters. Most of them are written as princesses who need to be saved from the 'wicked witch' and then fall in love with their prince charming.

III

Many children grow up with Disney. Disney movies have strong influence on children. Even though Disney count nine female character as princesses officially (Snow white, Cinderella, aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan and Tiara) when we look up "Disney Princess" brand, many times those first six appear. Disney Princess stories not only teach us how a princess looks but also how women gain happiness, meet a soul mate and live with the man. Women are always rescued by men and cannot live happy lives without men's help. There are many girls who develop a dream of happily-ever-after lives like those of Disney stories.

Prince Charming did not kiss Snow White to wake her, Ariel never loved Eric, the Beast was not angry and violent, Mulan never fell in love with her General, at least not in the original memoirs of the stories; these changes were added by Disney in comics, cartoons and movies to make them more interesting and to forward a sexist agenda. A multitude of sexist ménages are present in Disney movies teaching young girls that they are expected to play a submissive role in this patriarchal society. These fairy tales are symbolic of women's lives being shaped by male influences. Parents unknowingly harm their daughters by allowing them to indulge in their fairytale fantasies. According to Jack Zipes, leading expert of fairytales and German professor at the university of Mirmesota, the movies have "a type of stereotyping. . .that has adverse effects on children, in contrast to what parents think. . .Parents think they are eventually harmless- they are not harmless". [2] Thus Disney thrives and profits on young girls' illusions through their various marketing strategies including Princess Classes given in New York Disney store- and teaches the young girls the importance of beautiful dress and gorgeous good looks.

The origin of Disney's sexist portrayal of women can be traced fully in the depiction of Snow White. She is virginal, pretty, dutiful woman who is of course 'the fairest of them all', which initially refers to her beauty but also outlines her obedience as a subordinate woman. From the very beginning, her quest is one- to find her Prince Charming. As an early Disney film, traditional gender roles are presented showing her cooking and cleaning and mothering the seven dwarfs. She is portrayed naturally as a happy homemaker, as she waits for her prince to come and rescue her. Snow White here is somewhat pushed into the role she plays in this Disney Comic. The Queen in Snow White takes on the typical female role, reproducing the image of the femme fatal in to a jealous, self-centered, manipulative, conniving woman who forced into disguising her identity in order to

kill Snow White. Moreover we see that Snow White falls into a coma where she can only be awoken by 'love's first kiss'. More explicitly it seems that Snow White needs a man to save her and give her life. This produces a naïve ideal that by being patient, obedient and subordinate a woman will be saved from this lifestyle by the man of their dreams, concluding that no woman on their own accord can simply support herself.

IV

In 'The Little Mermaid', even once when Ariel has achieved her human form by her own means, sacrificing her sweet voice for legs, she cannot truly fulfill her desire to remain a human without the help of Eric, the representative of dominant male belonging to the patriarchal society as Ariel relies on Eric's kiss to make her dreams come true. Ariel's sacrifice itself represents blatant sexism in that she trades her means of communicating and expressing her intellect and personality for the physical sexual symbol of human legs making her into 'a woman as man wants her to be'. Even the Sea-Witch Ursula quells Ariel's lack of her sweet voice by telling her, "You'll have your looks, your pretty face, and don't underestimate the power of body language." [3] The lesson that is conveyed to the girls is that they need to sacrifice their voice- their power of communication, in order to achieve the bodily perfection which is the ultimate attribute for girls. When Ursula transforms her into human in order to win Prince Eric's love, she does so by becoming tall and slender, giving a message that a physical transformation is the best way to win a man's heart. The endings of the stories thus never change; for a woman to achieve perfect happiness, she has to find the perfect man. So Ariel has been criticized by feminists as though she seems to have little ambition to beyond getting her Prince.

V

A similar story occurs in Cinderella (1950), in which a young and beautiful servant girl is kept alienated and in servitude to her evil step mother and step sisters who are jealous of her beauty. Cinderella is an example of a woman who scrubs and cooks and is dependent on finding her Prince Charming who would come and sweep her off her feet, and save her from this slave like lifestyle like many of the female protagonists in Disney films. Cinderella dreams of a better life with her Prince Charming, a notion that if you wish hard, it will come true. The opening song, "The Dream is a wish your heart makes", sums this up fully, suggesting to "have faith in your dream" because some day they will come true. [4] Although in the movies they come true it still projects a woman's naivety and day dreaming nature, emphasizing their weaknesses as a woman. In the Disney version of fairytales females emerge as passive, inactive and totally without any mobility. In course of time Cinderella is rescued by her prince; she meets her soul mate and lives with the man. Many girls on seeing Disney version of Cinderella develops Cinderella complex, which has unconscious desires to be dependent on others, usually men. Disney movies might have strong influence.

VI

Mulan (1998) is based on a Chinese myth about a woman who saves China from the Huns. She basically single-handedly wipes out most of the Hun army with an avalanche. Mulan goes to fight instead of her father as he is too weak and ends up being the best and the most clever warrior and saves China. Mulan is similar to Belle, as she too isn't seen as acceptable in society and this idea of gender obligation. Women should be homemaker and wife, not clever and strong. In Mulan this idea of gender obligation is shown through the first scene where she is preparing to see the matchmaker. While she is being made 'beautiful' the women sing to Mulan a song called 'Honour us all', a song that imposes the traditional roles onto Mulan. They say that women should have 'tiny waists', 'be calm' and 'obedient'. [5] They even tell her that a man's main use for a woman is for her to have babies. Although the film 'Mulan' has a very strong undertone of a woman's obligation, the main character takes on traits that are stereotypically for men and breaks the traditional stereotypes. Mulan can do more than cook, clean and look beautiful. She takes a direct role in her attempts to enter the world of man as opposed to passively waiting to be saved. But still, it can be said that Disney uses the same "self-sacrificing" daughter role that is present in 'Beauty and the Beast'. After the independent and strong Mulan has become a successful warrior, her true happiness and honor comes through the implied marriage to a dominant male figure, which is her way to securing a "happily ever after" life. Her character reminds us that while Mulan could save China, she "is still just a girl in search of a man..." [6]

VII

It's no question that all the Disney princesses are beautiful characters; often their beauty serves a purpose in the plotlines to build up the stories. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz performed a content to analyze their representation of the "feminine beauty ideal" which they define as "the socially constructed notion that physical attractiveness is one of women's most important assets, and something all women should strive to achieve and maintain." It is a very common and well-known fact that "messages concerning women's beauty are far more dominant than those of men. This is very important to women's reaction to the feminine beauty

ideal in society. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz observed that in many ways the constant reproductions and promotions of feminine beauty perfection affect in many ways the behavior and attributes of women in society and the manner in which they present themselves. The celebration of feminine beauty is largely seen as oppressive, patriarchal practice that devalues, objectifies and subordinates women. But still many women willingly engage in “beauty ritual” and perceive being beautiful as empowering, not oppressive. In this way women indirectly internalize norms and adopt behaviors that reflect and reinforce their powerlessness in a more subtle way. These women who specially seek to gain power through their attractiveness are often seen as mostly dependent on men’s resources. [7]

This is a very well known fact that Disney princesses certainly influence young girls. The Disney Princess line was created in 2001 as advertising and marketing campaign targeted towards young girls (Orenstein. 2006). [8]The advertising campaign aims to attract a wide audience, of girls with the ultimate goal of encouraging children to personally identify with the characters so that they will purchase the associated products.(Do Rozario 2004).[9]The Disney princess paraphernalia have a huge impact on the way the young girls behave. Moreover the Disney princess toys that forms the part and parcel of the lines of the young girls, also, according to Wohlwend “ act as durable texts that concretize identities”. This means that the toy influences the identity of the young girls. This is dangerous for them because these Disney Princesses are unrealistic depictions of womanhood and harms a young girl’s perception of herself and how she should present herself in front of the society. Disney and its princess phenomenon have been identified as a powerful influence on children’s media and product consumerism, contributing to a new “girlhood”, that is largely defined by gender and consumption of related messages and products. These things associated with the Disney princesses encourage the girls to look as the Princesses looks, a wild impossible expectation. Wohlwend states that “the pervasive availability of consumer products associated with the Disney Princess blurs the line between play and reality, allowing children to live in-character.”[10] This is dangerous for the young girls who are about to face the harsh realities related to the society. But over the years the representation of women in Disney comics has evolved and changed with regards to existing social pressures and opinions. These heroines have evolved better reasoning, the Stepmothers have already slowly ceased to exist and the crone figures have grown more independent and less subservient. As time progress each film takes more control over their destinies. The importance of marrying a Prince as the goal of the plot has also recently begun to be questioned. These modern Disney Princesses like Tiana, Pocahontas et al reflects more varied elements of being a princess; they demonstrate that it is possible to be both happily married and lead an ever-after life and also have her own personal; career goals come true. These are the kinds of Disney Princesses that the girls should aspire to be like.

Peggy Orenstein, in her 2004 article for the New York Times, delves deep into the mystery of what has been called “The Supergirl Dilemma”, in which girls are pressured to be symbol of perfection, not just in looks but in studies, extracurricular involvement and societal attitude as well, after being continuously bombarded by parents calling their little daughter as “princess”. She notes that there are more than 25,000 Disney Princess items available in the market today. One may agree that there are other choices available for girls, if they decide not to be into the Disney dream.

Jack Zipes, the leading expert of fairy tales admits that, “...fairy tales do influence the manner in which children conceive the world...”[11]While many people think that Disney is only expressing the role society wants females to take it, it must also be taken into account that the gender roles expressed in the film influences the views and opinions of future generation, leading to a hopeless spiral of societies based wholly on gender rather than individual abilities.

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