
CHANGING TRENDS: A CHANGE IN THE DEPICTION OF WOMEN FROM IDEALISTIC TO THE REALISTIC

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Abstract: Every girl has aspired to be the epitome of perfection at some point or the other in their lives. This has been mostly influenced by the fairy-tales told to them or the animated princess movies they have watched when they were kids. This has led them to be influenced by the stereotypical depiction of a fragile looking girl, only to be admired for her looks and nothing else. However, this has gradually been changing over the past few years. There is a change in the way women are being portrayed in animated films like *Mulan*, *Brave* and *Frozen*. There is a gradual shift from the 'idealistic' to the 'realistic'. This paper analyses how animation companies have attempted to bring about changes in their depiction of female protagonists. Gender is a socio-cultural construct and this paper explores how animated movies are striving to make a break from these predefined ideologies of gender.

Keywords: Animation, Changing Depictions, Gender, Realistic, Stereotypes.

Introduction: Animated films have a unique way of effectively entertaining its audience while at the same time conveying a message. Disney, Pixar, DreamWorks and other animation companies have presented tales with gender-normative roles and class distinctions. The analyses of the gender roles and stereotypes that are portrayed in these films is important because the stereotypical way in which the feminine gender has been portrayed in these films can have consequences such as young girls adopting these depictions as idealistic and as role models for themselves. With the depiction of the woman as a damsel-in-distress waiting for her knight in shining armour to come and save her, the feminine gender has always been shown as someone who needs to be saved and is therefore dependant on the man to save her. This was probably due to the traditions and norms laid down by the patriarchal society as to what exactly a woman or a girl is supposed to be. This led to the stereotypical depicting of a fragile looking princess, dressed in gowns and only meant to be admired for her beauty and nothing else. Even the hand of the princess is seen as something that is won as though the princess were a prized possession or a trophy that one would collect. There is a slow but steady change in the way women are being portrayed in films like *Mulan*, *Brave* and *Frozen*. There is a gradual and prominent shift from the 'ideal' to the 'realistic'. This paper analyses how animation companies like Disney, Pixar and DreamWorks have attempted to bring about changes in the depiction of their female protagonists.

The depiction of the lead heroine has been changed in the films of the recent past. Even in making a change, the change has been real and not superficial. While animation films have certainly come a long way in changing the way a woman must be seen, the elements of 'magic' and 'happily ever after' are still retained. Has the magic and happiness been earned or is it something that they are given by virtue of

being a woman is something that must be looked into as this will alter the way in which animated movies are seen. The break from pre-defined formulas is an aspect that will be explored in this paper as it will enable one to understand the positive sub-texts that are being projected in these films.

One cannot ignore the fact that these movies influence young minds and the subtle influence of these films can change the perception of its viewers. According to the Constructivist and Cultivation theory by John Dewey and G. Gerbner respectively, one internalises what one views and makes the reality on screen as a model for appropriating behaviour in the real world. In a study conducted by Towbin et al, it was found that three themes that are common in all animated films with female protagonists is that a woman's appearance is more valuable than her intellect, women are helpless and in need of protection and that women are likely to marry. Recent films, however, have broken away from this predictable formula of stereotypical depiction and this is what the paper will mainly focus on.

In her essay, Judith Halberstam focuses on the uniqueness of animated films in that though they have clichéd messages, they also deliver social and political messages through a variety of mediums; animals, inanimate objects or for that matter, even emotions. They are a medium through which a particular message can be effectively transmitted. . Early Disney movies, in Benjamin's opinion, presented tales with gender-normative roles and class distinctions. What is interesting to note is the transformation of the narratives from a world of anarchy and anti-familial characters to a narrative of hope and humanity while facilitating a critique of the existing systems. What many fail to perceive is that this is a medium for change and mass propaganda. In her article Deborah Ross focuses on the various subtexts that exist in Disney movies. Even though the females are portrayed as heroines, they are attributed

masculine characteristics like in *Mulan*. The women represented are not always weak and resigned to their fate. Since Disney cannot portray characters involved in a lot of violence and bloodshed it tends to depict a happier version of the situation. Though not in its original form, Disney does portray the female protagonist as having some amount of choice yet a lot of determination and grit to get what they want. For example, in the *Little Mermaid*, Ariel is depicted as a character that is determined to get the best of both worlds without compromising on her already existing gifts. Though conservative in its approach, Disney does give us a positive view on a woman's fantasies. Comparing Alice and Ariel, one can see that girls have come a long way as far as their portrayal is concerned. The images used in movies such as these give feminism a reverse spin. Along with that, most movies end with a wedding in complete contradiction to the view that the female heroes should be presented with more options than just getting married and living happily ever after. Such inconsistencies however do not eliminate certain stereotypical ideas depicted. A closer look at the elements that inter-play with each other will give us a better understanding in reading and analysing the subtexts that exist.

This paper focuses on three movies that revolve around female characters and how they have attempted to break free from the existing stereotypes. *Mulan* is based on a Chinese legend 'Ballad of *Mulan*' that narrates the events and bravery of *Mulan* leading to China's safety. While the truth of the legend is questionable, the bravery and heroic deeds stand out as an inspiration for women. At a times where women were very much under the patriarchal dominance in society, *Mulan* stood to be a symbol of a woman's worth being nothing less to that of a man.

Mulan as a character breaks away from tradition in some ways but not completely. While it is true that she did do things that were unusual for women of her time and not really dream of finding her prince, she also adhered to the family traditions and tried her best to uphold the 'honour' of her family. As a character, she does not depend on men and makes efforts to survive in the training camp. She maintains her own identity and is not afraid of doing something that would go against the ideal norm of the patriarchal society. Her idea of an ideal woman is someone who has a brain! Even though the other men are disappointed in her ideas, she speaks in her mind.

The songs in the movie too are seen as reinforcing the main ideology that being in a man's world she must adhere to the norms and expectations set by them. The society does not approve of a woman who speaks her mind or has the intelligence to make decisions. Her very presence as a strong woman with opinions

and thoughts is seen as a threat and hence, death is the ultimate punishment for treason (in her case, joining the army under the guise of a man.) the idea of a perfect woman in the society as shown in the film is that of a woman who will make a good match and bring honour to the family so much so that they even have 'rules' as to what makes a woman 'perfect'. Even how a woman must look is all described through the music which is subconsciously internalized by many of its viewers. 'Calm, obedient... tiny waist... good breeding...' (Honour to us all, *Mulan*) are the qualities a woman must possess in order to be perfect. Even though *Mulan* tries to follow the norms, she cannot be the girl society expects her to be and even when she looks at herself in the mirror she questions what her true identity really is. There is a struggle between being what she ought to be and being true to herself. An analysis of the movie shows that the society is not very supportive towards the women in society, yet her conviction alone is enough for *Mulan* to do what she must. Even though her bravery was not initially appreciated, *Mulan* was seen as the protector of the country. The emperor bowing to her is the highest form of honour and this is symbolic of the society accepting a woman's worth. Her ultimate reward is when her father tells her that the awards were not important and the greatest gift was his daughter.

Mulan also depicted a lot of stereotypes. Though a woman was expected to be quiet and demure, she was not allowed to speak her mind. When she did not fit into certain characteristics, she was considered as a failure. The notion of what it means to be an ideal woman is present throughout the movie. In order to make her family proud, she knew she had to assume the role of a man. However, she admits in the end that she did it for herself, proving that she was just as good as, and even better than the men. If we pay close attention to the movie, we see that she receives attention and appreciation only as long as she is in the garb of a man. Once her true identity has been revealed, she is no longer given the same respect.

Gender has cultural meanings attached to it and how a woman is supposed to behave is therefore dictated by the society. Society influences one's perspective on what is appropriate behaviour for a man or woman. This in turn influences our understanding of identity and social practices. Since gender is something that is socially constructed, gender norms are also socially constructed by relations within the society. In *Mulan*, the society frowns upon a woman who is intellectual and speaks her mind. The act of a woman speaking in public itself is considered dishonourable in the eyes of the society as it symbolises defiance and disobedience. But the film portrays *Mulan* as a determined and headstrong character who is not afraid of standing up for herself and being true to who she really is. Since femininity is considered as

inferior to men, the film challenges gender norms by refusing to let the society define how women should be portrayed and therefore reconstruct the identity of women. *Mulan* also showed the struggle of attaining feminism and that patriarchy is a strong construction that cannot easily be broken. Nevertheless, it sowed the seeds for movies like *Brave* and *Frozen*. *Mulan* does not portray absolute feminism, but it was a change in the way a woman's worth is seen.

At a young age children are taught that there are distinctions in gender roles and one must adhere to those roles. Theories such as the constructivist theory and the cultivation theory state that young children learn from the visual media and internalize the gender roles that are portrayed in these films. As a character, Merida stands as a role model for young women in today's world. While previous Disney princesses have had attributes of men, *Brave* focuses that women do not need men to save them; they are capable of holding their own. The problem that lies in most Disney movies is that women are depicted as having only one goal in life i.e. to find their 'Prince'. Or they might act as substitute men i.e. disguised as men (*Mulan*). While Merida is not the first princess to fight against the patriarchal system, *Brave* is Disney's first big step towards the positive representation of women.

Brave revolves around the relationship between mother and daughter and princess Merida's refusal to bow down to gender biased norms. Her acts of defiance set her apart from other docile and complying princesses who preceded her. Her bravery to challenge fate is seen where she states at the end of the movie:

"There are those who say fate is something beyond our command, that destiny is not our own. But I know better. Our fate lives within us. You only have to be brave enough to see it."(*Brave*, 2012)

Truer words could not have been said. Even in her appearance, Merida does not conform to traditional norms; she has unruly bright orange curls and a more realistic figure i.e. a slight paunch and wider hips. She dislikes the restrictive clothes she's made to wear and prefers wearing more comfortable clothing. Along with her appearance, her personality also goes against the patriarchal idea of a submissive woman. Though not portrayed as a perfect woman, she is depicted as one who makes decisions, accepts her shortcomings and takes control of her own destiny.

While Merida is depicted as a feminist, her parents and the society in general is shown as having feminist characteristics. They respect the queen and Merida is allowed to make her own decisions. Several other features in the film also break away from the traditional fairy-tale stereotypes: the mother-daughter relationship, highlighting family dynamics, downplays romance i.e. there is no love interest at all

in the film. Even the rescue scene involves only the women clearly sending the message across that women can take care of themselves and they need no prince' to come and save them.

According to Henry Giroux, Disney has become a new schooling mechanism. Certain tropes concerning Disney Princesses' have been recurrently represented in the media. Queen Elinor represents everything that a traditional Disney Princess ought to be. Descartes has proved that gender roles portrayed in films influence children's ideas of gender. While these representations may not reflect reality, they "organize, construct and mediate our understanding of reality, emotion, and imagination" (Sturken & Cartwright).

We see the subordination of women in the character of Queen Elinor who tell Merida 'how' a princess must behave. As with other Disney movies, this movie too is narrated within the framework of a masculine narrative. The domestication of women is still a very prominent theme in the movie and this is reflected when Giroux' says that Disney movies are creating a metaphor for the traditional housewives in the making. Moreover a princess must take care of her appearance. This unrealistic representation directly affects the audience's self-esteem because it portrays that a woman's appearance is more important than her intellect. If Queen Elinor is the symbol of a traditional Disney Princess then Merida is the symbol of a reckless teenager. This is all the more reason why a change in the portrayal of women was needed in animated films.

Merida is the embodiment of the long awaited break from the traditional portrayal of princesses. Merida firmly believes in writing her own destiny and she seeks it. She is no longer just another passive Disney Princess; she is a princess whom every girl can relate with. She is rebellious, stubborn and impulsive. She can take care of herself; she doesn't need to be protected by anyone. She is a testament of bravery because she defies traditional roles. Another point in her favour is that Merida does not have any love interest and what's even more interesting is that she doesn't even want one. She is not concerned with finding true love or romance but her own independence. Merida is better skilled than most of the men in her kingdom, even in the sport of archery. The stereotyping one would observe in these films would be that of overgeneralizing the attitudes and behaviour patterns of women.

But there are certain drawbacks in her portrayal as an empowered female lead. While she might be the hero of the film, she is restricted within the context of a fairy-tale. Another important feature to note is that Merida makes things right by 'sewing' the tapestry which she had willingly cut with the sword. Maybe Merida is a reflection of the 21st century girl who

wants to be free to pursue her dreams but also be protected by her parents. Merida gives the girls of all ages a reason to relate to her because their struggles are her struggles too. Merida's rejection on customs and traditions make girls rethink their priorities i.e. look beyond marriage and true love. Merida breaking away from societal rules to assert her independence and individuality is a model for girls to look up to in breaking free from their golden cages.

As the winner of two academy awards, *Frozen* was a very popular film that released in 2013 based on the well-known fairy tale *The Snow Queen*. Breaking stereotypes and the showcasing of more realistic girls amidst the elements of magic and fairy-tale setting is something that must be noticed in the recent animation films. In *Frozen*, Queen Elsa and her relationship with her sister, Anna, has been narrated in a beautiful and compelling way. The sisters together redefine what real and 'true' love actually is. Each made sacrifices for the other without letting the other know about it. Also the fact that there is someone who is 'the one' for you never really exists is a new element that is added in the movie as it attempts to break free of the typical Disney Princess film. Queen Elsa questions the unrealistic idea of 'love at first sight' and marrying someone you just met without thinking of the consequences. While most of the other films showcase the marriage of a princess with her Prince Charming whom she probably met once or twice, *Frozen* displays that acts of love need not always be romantic and end in love interests or marriages.

The main protagonist, Queen Elsa, has no romantic interest and Anna is made aware of the fact that love interest is actually the villain. The climax highlights the ideals of feminism by portraying Anna as the independent and intentional rescuer. Though Disney has attempted to break free of stereotypical gender roles, there is implicit normalization of male dominance in the movie. Anna is obsessed with the idea of 'Prince Charming' and this is reflected in her decision to marry Hans as soon as they meet. The statement made by queen else is very relevant in this context: you can't marry someone you just met. Here Queen Elsa takes on the role of a practical advisor unlike other Disney movies that promote the notion of 'love at first sight'.

The famous song 'Let it go' is not only a mirror of Queen Elsa's feelings, but of every girl hanging on to every moment of the movie. The lyrics of the song are very liberating and meaningful. Music plays an important role in animated movies and *Frozen* is no exception. Queen Elsa is the woman society expects a girl to be; quiet, submissive and unseen. 'Let it go' then becomes an act of rebellion, of voicing your own opinion, of taking a stand when all around people tell you to do something against one's wishes. A woman

who remains true to herself and does not pay heed to what others think of her is what Queen Elsa stands for. The cold terrain around her is also symbolic of the fact that society does not approve her for who she really is and the attempts to find her and kill her in order to return the kingdom to its original state. What it symbolises is that there is a fear of her power among her own people and as much as a woman tries to bring change in the way they are looked at, they cannot do so without the support of the society. And this is why changing a society's mind-set is important. It can lead to great progress or regression in the way women are perceived or treated in the society.

Another interesting element that one notices in this film is that the traditional notion of true love has completely been changed. Love is redefined in every way in this film from romantic to platonic. The very fact that the depiction of the 'act of true love' has changed from 'true love's kiss' to 'risking your life to save someone else's' is a big step in changing the stereotypical perceptions and traditions in the mind-set of the society.

Analysing a movie that tries to take a break from traditional scripts makes one realize that some ideas just don't change. They may be subdued or attacked, but their implicit influence still manages to retain itself. However, when a conscious effort is made into changing the existing norms, 'even a grain of rice can tip the scales.' In terms of the change in the portrayal of women in films, *Frozen* is a gigantic step in the right direction as it does not highlight the importance of breaking stereotypes by removing a potential love interest, instead it creates the possibility of a romantic alliance only to shatter the illusion and bring into focus the true meaning of love. According to the Constructivist theory, children learn from their experiences and what they observe around them. In the age of technology, everything is visual and what one observes, one internalises. The Cultivation Theory states that watching television influences the viewers into engaging in behaviour that one views on television or any medium of mass communication. On the basis of these two theories one can say that a change can be brought about in the way one perceives the society around them and engage in behaviour that brings about a change in the way women are portrayed since art influences life as much as life influences art. Disney in this context is making dramatic changes in the way it portrays and depicts women, and though the change is slow, it is constant. In the above films, there is a definite change in the portrayal of women, from their appearance to their ideas about the world around them. What must also be kept in mind is that movies are influenced by a society's cultural norms as much as it influences the culture of the society. Gender

roles as prescribed by the society are often patriarchal and so deeply rooted that even women themselves follow these rules without questioning them as seen in the case of Mulan and Princess Merida. And though an effort is being made by various organisations to change the way women are portrayed, the next step in the change from 'idealistic' to 'realistic' expectations is in changing the perceptions of the society. How a woman is depicted is largely dependent on how she is perceived, and this change is much needed in society today.

This change in the depiction of female protagonists is significant because they lead to a change in the perceptions of the audience, not only in the way they perceive a woman but in their interactions with them too. This paper has only analysed how the portrayal

of women has changed over time. However, further research can be done as to whether the change in the depiction of the feminine gender is really effective on the audience and to what extent. According to the Cultivation theory, one believes that the social reality portrayed in the visual media is reflective of the reality in the physical world around us. A new movie, *Moana*, due to release later this year by Disney is another movie with a female lead and no love interest. As more animated films are being released that depict women as more independent and realistic, a definite shift is therefore seen in the portrayal of the female lead from the 'idealistic' to the 'realistic'. This is surely a move in the breaking of stereotypes and gender specific norms as stated by society.

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