RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE EVOLUTION OF THE REPRESENTATION OF DISNEY PRINCESSES OVER THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: ITS CHANGING INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Disney released its first princess movie Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs in the year 1930 and since have produced various others which have been a major part of popular culture in the West and gradually all over the world. This research aims to study how these movies represent the social conditions, especially for women, in those respective eras. The objective of this research is to point out these developments and understand and urge future story tellers, film makers and artists to create characters that could inspire young audience to be independent, self-sufficient and wise.

Keywords: Disney princesses, evolution, change, developments

This research will try to point out how the pattern of projecting Disney princesses has evolved from its first movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to the recent ones that include *Tangled* and *Brave*. This research will investigate how these patterns changed over the years and the reasons why they might have changed. It tries to question the cultural influence that these movies had in its making and tries to prove why these movies need to further improve its patterns of projecting these women. The research will also question the effects of these patterns on children and how they contribute to shape their basic social constructs.

Disney's highest grossing movies mainly include the ones with fairy tale princesses. Every individual has grown up watching these or at least have been aware of their existence. These stories are familiar to everyone and have played an important role in our cultural history. These movies extend their business by creating merchandise like apparel, toys, backpacks, home décor and note books with their famous labels on them. As of now, eleven characters are considered Disney Princesses, and they are Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, Rapunzel and Merida.

All these characters follow a pattern of similar appearances, conflicts, love interests and consequences but we cannot avoid noticing these qualities changing along the course of the twentieth and twenty-first century. The appearances of these princesses have evolved throughout the years. Snow White in the 1937 movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is a young, fair skinned girl who is described as having "hair as black as ebony, lips as red as a rose, skin as white as snow." Meanwhile the latest addition to the list of princesses Merida from the 2012 movie *Brave* is a woman with wild curly hair and her bow slung to the back

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and arrows around her waist which is considered to be a shabby appearance compared to Snow White whose appearance was disciplined.

In the same way these princesses have evolved in their abilities of being self-sufficient. Early princesses like Snow White and Aurora let unpleasant events happen to them without really having any control over them, while the relatively newer ones like Mulan and Rapunzel at least made an effort to make changes in their lives and fight against these unpleasant situations. Their relationship with their "princes" and other male characters have also evolved from being one of suppression and helplessness to, definitely not a superior, but one with an almost equal position.

One cannot bring down feminist analysis to these princesses being damsels in distress and in search for their prince charming, but this research aims to examine how, throughout the years, their relationships, their struggles, the manner in which they fight these conflicts and how their bodies are projected have changed with the changes in the society and how women are perceived by the common man. One also needs to understand that this evolution will be complete only if these movies showcase characters who are completely independent, liberated, look real and have a voice of their own. This research hopes to inspire upcoming artists to create material that would fulfil these conditions.

 The primary texts used in this research are the Disney movies *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Mulan*, *Tangled* and *Brave*. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is the story of Snow White who is exceptionally beautiful whose jealous stepmother orders for her murder but later realises that she is alive somewhere far away with seven dwarfs. This is when she visits Snow White disguised as a hag and drugs her with a poisonous apple that puts her to sleep which could be broken only by the kiss of true love. *Cinderella* tells us the story of a young woman who ends up living with her wicked stepmother and evil stepsisters after her father's death. They treat her as a maid and one day refuses her permission to go for a palace ball. But with the help of a fairy godmother she is able to go and is strictly asked to be back before midnight. At this ball she meets her prince and they fall for each other but their meeting is interrupted by time and they have to be separated. The story continues with the prince searching for Cinderella all over the kingdom. In the movie *Sleeping Beauty* Maleficent, the witch, curses for Princess Aurora to die on her sixteenth birthday out of jealousy. However, with the help of fairies, the curse is turned into a deep sleep that can be broken only by the kiss of a prince. In *The Little Mermaid* Ariel is an adventurous young woman who falls in love with a prince who is human, who she met in one of her visits to the surface, which is forbidden by her father. In order to be with the prince she makes a deal with the sea witch to become human for three days which leads to events that requires the father to sacrifice for Ariel. In *Beauty and the Beast* an arrogant prince and his servants are cursed by an evil witch that turns him into a Beast until he learns to love. Belle enters his castle as her father is imprisoned by him and eventually tames him to be a better loving person. *Mulan* decides to disguise as a man and train for the Chinese military instead of her father. She uses her skills and smartness in this journey. In the midst of these adventures she meets and falls in love with a captain. Rapunzel in the movie *Tangled* is a cheerful woman who has seventy feet long hair which has magical powers. She is locked inside a tower by a witch from the time of her birth and when she meets a bandit, Eugene, they make a deal and escape for an adventure. In the most recent of these movies, *Brave* tells the story of Merida who is a bold and gutsy princess who wishes to achieve her dreams by herself. This fearless attitude leads to events of chaos in the kingdom for which she seeks the help of a witch which further results her to discover true courage and bravery. These are the movies that are used as primary sources in order to point out the gradual differences in the way the women in them are portrayed. They are chosen to showcase how cultural evolution is reflected in all of them. This research aims to show these changes in pattern and hopes for more change in the future.

Disney princesses have children as its main audience. The kind of characters projected on the screen will definitely make an influence on them. Childhood is the period when individuals are forming basic constructs of the society. We are aware that these movies project women as helpless, supressed, needed to be rescued and in need of a male protagonist. But we need to understand that these patterns are evolving and

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contemporary film makers are making an effort to break down the traditional notions of a princess. The objective of this research is to point out these developments and understand and urge future story tellers, film makers and artists in general to create characters, whether male or female, in this particular case female, independent, sensible and real in a manner that everybody could relate to her in some way.

Childhood is a very crucial period of an individual's life because they are exposed to new ideas and frameworks at this stage. Most of all, these ideas and frameworks are the ones that they get influenced by the most. Disney has been producing its princess movies since the 1930s. By this we need to understand that it has been a part of our historical culture for many decades. They have had a large audience of mainly young girls and have played an important role in the shaping of their ideas about life, relationships and situations. Another aspect we need to notice is the corresponding change in the projection of them because of the changes in the social, economic and political atmosphere throughout the years. This research will try to point out this evolution and will try to point out why this needs to continue and improve in the future. There has been numerous research done on this topic but none of them acknowledge the improvement in the portrayal of women due to feminist efforts in reality.

In Nicole Sawyer's essay "Feminist Outlooks at Disney Princess's," she talks about how the Walt Disney Production tries to showcase an ideal woman or an ideal social structure through their female protagonist. She observes how children are eager learners and therefore actively construct social worlds. She also acknowledges the fact that Disney is aware of the feminist criticism of its movies and tries to improve and satisfy them in their next ones. She uses qualitative methods of studying surveys done by other researchers who give statistical data about how many hours children spend watching videos and how they watch much more than adolescents. She agrees that social changes have influenced Disney to make these princesses more assertive but according to her the basic plot and personality traits remain the same. This is where the present research differs from Sawyer's. This research believes that there are significant changes in how Disney showcases women through its female protagonists as social environment changes. It believes that even though it is a gradual evolution, there definitely is an effort in making these women much more independent and self-sufficient. Her research has great relevance to the present research because it provides backing for claims like how these movies portray women and how it influences children.

In the article "Damsels and Heroines: The Conundrum of the Post-Feminist Disney Princess," Cassandra Stover has analysed the historic appearance of Disney female characters in relation to women's movements. She also argues how there is certain "anti-feminist backlash in representation of postmodern Disney female characters" (1). The author studies historical events and the corresponding Disney princess movies that came out around that time. This article will help this research to justify the historical influence on these movies. This research will explore how this influences children and therefore needs to evolve much more in the future.

In her essay "Power to the Princess: Disney and the Creation of the Twentieth-Century Princess Narrative," Bridget Whelan talks about the prevalence and effect of fairy tale stories before the production of the first Disney princess movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. She explains how stories like *Hansel and Gretel* and *Jack and the Beanstalk* were popular among children but the influence that *Snow White*, the moving picture, made on them was much more effective. She also studies how there exists princess stories like "The Princess Who Stood on Her Own Two Feet" in the form of books and essays but since they do not conform to the accepted norms, they are not adapted into high-budget movies. Her writing points out the prevalence of children's stories with stronger and independent characters and why they did not influence children as much as the Disney Princess franchise did. Her essay helps this research to prove how material that fits into accepted societal norms is given attention and therefore receives popularity.

In the article "Disney's *Mulan*. Feminist Ideology in Animation" Molly Nicholas gives a detailed analysis of how the 1998 movie *Mulan* broke the conventional norms of portraying women but at the same time showcased their supressed position in the society by using qualitative methods of analysing the movie visually. This article helps the present research to prove that Disney made an effort to make changes in the

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characteristics of female protagonists towards the end of the twentieth century. Lisa Brocklebank's "Disney's *Mulan*—the 'True' Deconstructed Heroine?" is another article that discusses how in *Mulan* there is a "paradigm shift" in the projection of gender (270). According to Brocklebank the movie showcased the needed changes in the outlook of the society about gender and also various communities.

In "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale," Marcia Lieberman explains how every female protagonist in these movies need to be beautiful and how that is a quality that will be rewarded and is every woman's ultimate goal. She also points out how they are passive, docile and dependent. If they are powerful and active characters, they usually are the evil stepmother or the helpful fairy godmother who is old. It reviews ancient fairy tales other than the Disney ones to point out how there too women are supressed and needy. This article helps this research to describe the female characters in these movies in a detailed manner.

In Cathy Lynn's "'Cinderella' as a Dirty Joke: Gender, Multivocality, and the Polysemic Text," she analysis the extreme contrast between the original *Cinderella* and a dirty joke version of it, which includes accepting the fact that Cinderella could menstruate like every woman and have sexual needs like every human. This area of discussion would provide this research with information about how Disney princesses need to be real and ordinary for them to be much more relatable. On the other hand Karlyn Crowley and John Pennington in their "Feminist Frauds on the Fairies? Didacticism and Liberation in Recent Retellings of 'Cinderella'" refer to Charles Dicken's essay "Frauds on the Fairies" and how he believed that ancient fairy tales are reconstructed in order to teach moral lessons. According to him these stories need to preserve its purity and should not be tampered with according to the changes and circumstances in the present society.

Karen E. Wohlwend in her "Damsels in Discourse: Girls Consuming and Producing Identity Texts through Disney Princess Play" used quantitative methods of conducting ethnographic studies on kindergarten children to find out how children, especially girls, reacted to and played with princess dolls and toys. The study proved how these young girls revised the story lines according to their situations and limitations. This study will contribute to this research in order to show how children perceive media and how they use it in their personal life.

The article "Hetero-Romantic Love and Heterosexiness in Children's G-Rated Films" by Karin A. Martin and Emily Kazyak focusses on how heterosexuality is constructed in Disney movies. They discuss that it is constructed by showcasing that "hetero-romantic love relationships" are the ones that are perfect and eternal (317). They also explain how the male gaze, portrayed in these movies, contribute to the construction of heterosexuality in the minds of children. This article is expected to back this research with information to prove that media exposed to children can highly influence them to shape identities.

"A Fairy Tale Reality? Elfriede Jelinek's *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty* and the Mythologization of Contemporary Society" is an article by Birgit Tautz that studies how Jelinek has created the "princess myth" in her rewriting of *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*. This research could back its claims of construction of passive female characters under the patriarchal rule from this particular article.

Dorothy Hurley's article "Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess" points how fairy tales whether in written or visual form affect and influence children's belief system and self-identity. It talks about standardised beauty expectations that favour the "white" and do not take women of colour into consideration. This article therefore helps to prove that unrealistic body image expectations could damage a child's self-identification and self-appreciating process.

In the article "The Meaning of Fairy Tale within the Evolution of Culture," Jack Zipes explains the evolution of fairy tales from stories that were told orally from generation, to generation to printed books, to animated movies. He tries to point out how these stories reached the audience in the present because it adapted itself to the changing societal environment. The present research also focuses on this evolution and hopes to influence future artists to bring many more changes according to the present needs.

In this way this research will be using sources that have previously worked on the same areas and will try to back its arguments and claims with them. This research will try to discuss a detailed evolution of the

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portrayal of Disney princesses throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century and will also explain the influence it has on children.

This research will be using a qualitative method of analysing movies which will try to find out the common patterns used in them to describe its characters. This will prove the change in these patterns as there are corresponding changes in the society and its outlook towards gender roles and female personalities. In this method the researcher will be visually analysing these movies and will try to find signs along all of them that indicate evolution.

Feminism is the methodology used in this research. Therefore it will look into the various feminist movements and ideologies in the past centuries and how that could have influenced the developments in the princesses. The basic goal is to point out evolution by examining whether these movies portrayed political, economic, cultural and personal equality between the sexes. The influence of the second and third wave of feminism in the making of these movies will be discussed in detail in this research. The main arguments that this research aims to have are changes in the body image, which will examine the appearances of these princesses and how they changed from a disciplined and perfect one to a considerably ordinary and real one. This research will focus on how the princesses in the twentieth century are much more docile and have no choice in their relationships compared to the ones in the twenty-first century. It will point out how they have changed from letting unpleasant events happen to them to how in later movies they take control of such situations themselves. Its aim is to explain how these movies make an impact on children and help them construct gender roles and use them in their personal lives. And finally this research tries to argue why Disney princess movies need more evolution. Here the research will try to explain why the present change in the creation of an ideal princess character needs to improve and lead to a stage where there is absolute equality.

This research aims to point out the evolution of patterns of projecting female characters in Disney movies, especially featuring princesses. This research will try to influence story tellers, moviemakers and artists to create characters who are free of suppression, gender stereotypes and ideal appearances. In the first section of the research the Disney princess's appearance will be analysed and discussed throughout centuries. In the very first Disney movie, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Snow White is a beautiful young woman with ebony black hair, skin as white as snow, like her name itself suggests, red lips and a dainty build. *Cinderella*, which was released in 1950, also shows the princess as a petite woman with perfect features, blonde hair and typical clothing. Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty* that came out in the year 1959 has mature facial features unlike the previous ones who looked much more childlike and innocent. Even she has long blonde hair, fair skin and red lips like the previous ones. The only change in the span of twenty years is that the director tried to make the princess look more grown-up rather than like a little girl. *The Little Mermaid* released in 1989, almost thirty years after *Sleeping Beauty* came out. Ariel had a very different appearance than the earlier princesses. Her clothing is much more revealing than the others and her hair is red, unlike the standard blonde. However features like perfect red lips, light skin and petite structure remained the same. In the 1991 movie *Beauty and the Beast*, like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Belle's appearance is suggested in the title itself. She is also an exceptionally beautiful woman with standard princess features. *Mulan* a movie that was released in 1998 was a shift from the classic "white" beauties. Mulan is an Asian princess who has the standard Asian features. She is the first princess to wear soldier uniforms and to be armed with weapons. By the end of the twentieth century directors were clearly making an effort to communicate with the other side of the world and thus created characters like Mulan, who was very different in appearance from the rest of the princesses. "Within tales featuring cross-dressing, the disguise of the woman seems most often to result from socioeconomic necessity, the need to prove one's worth as equal to that of a male, the exigencies of survival, the yearning to escape an undesirable situation, or at times, from the combinations of all of the above factors" (Broklebank 273). Therefore one can also question why Mulan's warrior qualities can only be revealed when she is cross-dressed as a man. However in the midst of this one cannot deny the fact that the creator of the character has tried to break away from the typical portrayal of these women. Rapunzel in the 2010 movie *Tangled* is one of the newest princesses. She is known for her extremely long magical blonde hair, which is originally brown like

her parents. This could suggest that blonde is considered a superior colour and therefore relates with magical powers. Apart from her hair, Rapunzel's appearance is like any other princess. The most recent Disney princess is Merida from the 2012 movie *Brave*. She is a lot like Mulan because she is always has her arrows strapped to her waist and her bow at the back. Merida, unlike the classic princess, has messy and unruly curly hair. She is seen in comfortable clothing which would be easy while fighting enemies. Therefore we can clearly see how the appearances of these princesses evolved from a well-dressed and well-groomed one to a shabby and disorganised one.

In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, there is absolutely no relationship between Snow White and Prince Charming. The prince only sees Snow White once and falls in love with her. He appears the second time when she is poisoned by the apple and he saves her life by kissing her. There is no mutually falling in love with each other in this scenario. The prince assumes that he is supposed to kiss her and is confident that she will wake from the dead. Snow White has no say in this situation. She is a passive receiver. "The narratives of both JonBenet and Diana are ideologically constructed and reflect a narrativized production and representation of gender. Both embody a normalised cultural expectation of femininity and reflect a dominant ideology of female dependency and of objectified sexuality linked with overt commodification" (Conrad 129). In the earlier Disney princess movies the women are much more dependent and more important is given to their appearance than their intellect. The Disney princess movie that came after this was *Cinderella*. Here a better relationship than that of Snow White and her prince exists between Cinderella and the prince. Cinderella attends the ball and meets Prince Charming. They connect immediately and they dance together. In this story the one sided love seen in the previous movie is advanced into love at first sight. In this second Disney princess movie both the prince and Cinderella are attracted to each other and later the prince takes great effort to find her. There is more communication between Aurora and her prince Phillip. They meet each other in the woods and come to know each other, unaware that their marriage was prearranged when they were new-borns. Ariel's love story in *The Little Mermaid* is one of the first ones that has great conflicts and hurdles. The couple go through various circumstances and encounters. Ariel is the one who finds Eric in one of her tours to the surface. If she would not explore and be curious, she would not even come in contact with the world that would later be her home. Prince Eric and Ariel have a relationship where there is equal sense of responsibility between both of them. Ariel is not entirely dependent on him, even though he does save her life in various situations. One also needs to look at the relationship Ariel shares with her father, King Triton. This is the first movie where the princess is seen interacting freely with the highest male member of the family. This can be seen as a shift from the previous movies where the princesses did not have a healthy and an accomplished relationship with the father. Towards the end when Ariel is in great trouble, where she is under, Ursula, the witch's custody, it is her father and not Prince Eric who rescues her. Therefore one begins to see differences in the princess's relationship with other male characters and how she is more open and clear about her opinions and decisions. Unlike the previous Disney princess movies, *Beauty and the Beast* is the Beast's story rather than Belle's. The Beast is the central character, even though Belle is the reason for the advances that happen in the narrative. It is Belle who finally saves the Beast's life, as it is because of her that he is able to love a person truly, which helps to lift the curse. Belle also sacrifices herself in order to rescue her father from the clutches of the Beast's custody. Therefore it is clear that rather than being saved by male characters she is taking problems in her hands and solving it her own way. Mulan also comes to her father's aid when there is an emergency and her father is asked to join the Chinese army. She takes up his responsibility and becomes a warrior princess. She is the first active princess who goes to the extent of literally fighting the evil other than in the previous movies where the princesses help others with their good deeds, love and intelligence, which can be accounted as an emotional help. Mulan goes out of her way to save the entire nation from the authorities of the Huns, which was a first in the history of Disney princess movies. *Tangled* also portrays Rapunzel as a woman who wants to explore the world herself and find the mystery of the sky lanterns she sees every year. Her relationship with Eugene is a mutual contribution and not one sided. They meet each other on their way to their respective adventures. Rapunzel and Eugene are shown as a couple who have a great friendship. They do

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not share the kind of love that emerges out of admiration of beauty, which is a common phenomenon in the movies of the twentieth century. *Brave* is the latest Disney princess movie and has made great efforts to showcase a princess who is a fearless warrior who has principles of her own. This is the first Disney princess movie that does not involve a male character who rescues or is of great importance. The focus is on Merida and her relationship with her mother. In this movie, Merida is in the process of saving her mother from the magic spell that turned her into a bear. It is interesting that this movie has not created a male love interest at all. This characteristic does not make the movie look incomplete. It is absolutely complete with Merida's experiences and conflicts.

"The 'princess effect' has taken a toll on how young girls grow into the mature emotionally developed women" (Sternberg 113). Children are highly influenced by the images they see on television. For them that is the ideal world and therefore the ideas portrayed on screen is what children want to acquire themselves. This tendency to acquire these ideal relationships and appearances can also leave its impact later, when the child grows up. When this kind of material is showcased to children repeatedly, they tend to consider them to be perfect situations. "Feminist deconstructionists argued that such pictorial representations have perpetuated Western society's conventional understanding of femininity. At the forefront was Simone de Beauvoir, who believed that gender and female identity are not the expression of biological sex, but rather are constructed within a particular cultural framework" (Paoli). Individuals are not born with certain concepts about how a man should behave and how a woman should. It is only when he is exposed to cultures, and in this case these movies that have strong stereotyping, that they acquire concepts. "Among other things, these tales present a picture of sexual roles, behavior, and psychology, and a way of predicting outcome or fate according to sex, which is important because of the intense interest that children take in 'endings'; they always want to know how things will 'turn out'" (Lieberman 384). Therefore children are inspired by the ending of stories. In most of these movies the princesses behave in a very passive and docile way and these same women are shown to have a happy ending. Children would probably assume that the reason for that happy ending was because the princess was a very calm and subordinate individual.

This research may not be able to explore every Disney Princess movie in detail and might leave out few minute details where there might be some change in the patterns used. Since this research has time constrains, it won't be able to conduct surveys in order to prove the current influence of these movies on children.

This research is an attempt to discover the changes and improvements brought about throughout the years in the showcasing of Disney Princesses. It will also try to understand the psychological effect they have on children's personal life. It might not be able to point out all the minute details of this evolution but hopes to inspire future artists to create characters who have strong personalities, who are in power with their male protagonists.

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