

Disney Portrayal of Gender Roles in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Beauty and the Beast, and Frozen

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Abstract. Many parents consider giving fairytales books and films with the “happily ever after” theme with princesses and princes charming characters to their little ones. For parents, fairytale means Disney’s products. Disney, as one of the largest media companies in the world, has been using the traditional approach for producing its films. However, Disney changed their approach and recently has been using the progressive approach in the contemporary setting. Disney also sets an example to transgress and shape ways of thinking in society worldwide. Using Mulvey’s theory about the male gaze and three Disney films which are Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Beauty and the Beast (1991), and Frozen (2013), this paper will discuss the change of view from damsels in distress to heroines. This analysis aims to identify the gender roles displayed in Disney’s characters and how within the films, Disney has changed in few decades.

Keywords. Gender Roles, Disney, Male Gaze, Film, Mulvey, Animated Films.

1. Introduction

Many parents consider giving fairytales books and films with the “happily ever after” theme with princesses and princes charming characters to their little ones. For parents, fairytale means Disney’s products [1][2]. It is interesting to discuss the development of Disney and its stories in animated films and how they shaped society in their minds and goals in life. Not only that the stories have shaped American society, but also the girls around the world whose childhood was filled with Disney’s fairytales. This analysis employs Mulvey’s theory about the male gaze and three Disney films which are *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) (*SW*), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) (*BB*), and *Frozen* (2013). Those three films are used to analyze the shifting of gender relations in Disney’s Princesses Films. In this paper, I will research the change of view from damsels in distress to heroines using Mulvey’s theory and the history of Disney’s animated films as the frameworks. I chose those three films because they are Disney’s prominent films in their eras. I aim to identify the gender roles displayed in those three films, using Mulvey’s male gaze theory, and how within the films, Disney’s movies have changed in few decades. Therefore, how those three films have shaped and eventually changed Disney for the better or worse will be the concluding paragraph of the essay.

2. Method

To know more about the transformation that Disney made in the three films between the 1930s until

today, the theory will be the foundation that leads the analysis into a good framework. In her article, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey emphasizes on phallogocentric society that embodies and dominates the narrative of the films [3]. She argues that a woman in a film is only a *signifier* or only important in her appearance, unlike men who are the *bearer* of the meaning in the story. Here, *bearer* means the maker of the story, how to make the story becomes meaningful at the end. Mulvey believes that only by the beauty of the female lead in the film, she will have the *bearer* on how her life would be meaningful, which is when she marries the prince charming, advancing the story as a “happily ever after” one. Mulvey, further explains the pleasure that cinema has offered to the audiences, how being passive is associated with females while, the male is the active looker, which ultimately creates the term of the male gaze. The male gaze is a term that depicts the traditional woman’s role to be displayed and looked at because of her strong visual appearance (being beautiful, weak, and passive) in the film, as an image or spectacle for the heterosexual society or male audiences. The woman in the film is only limited as an inspiration for the *bearer* or the man, and she does not have any importance in the films. Therefore, the woman as an enjoyable spectacle or gaze for the man needs a man to be the rescuer. Mulvey, then breaks down how the male gaze can be found within the film, which is first, through the camera movement that records the story, secondly, through the audiences as they watch the films, and lastly, through the characters within the film’s story [3]. Applying Mulvey’s theory about male gaze into the case studies of three prominent Disney’s animated films ranging from the 1930s, 1990s, and 2010s is prevalent as male gaze theory depicts how a woman is seen as an object that needs the rescuing, a pattern seen in most of Disney’s films before Disney decided to become “woke”. According to Abas Mirzaei, “woke” is a term coined in the 1940s that has resurfaced recently due to the Black Lives Matter movement in the 2010s [4]. The phrase “stay woke” has become a symbol of the movement to fight racism, sexism, and refugee rights which all fall into contemporary social issues. Disney was always seen as a clean, informative, and profitable media company in North America and worldwide [5]. Disney played safe as being the favorite among the conservatives, but recently Disney has joined the woke culture to be progressive. Disney has changed into a media company that slowly leaves its conservativeness and joins the social issues bandwagon and that reflects into their products that include not only their Disneyland and Disney World park management but also the films they produce in recent years. This movement, however still fits into Mulvey’s male gaze and how Disney’s *Frozen* which was released in the 2010s has become one of the most woke Disney’s animated films. Elsa and Anna are the heroines that need no saving from the male characters in the film and need no man to advance their happy ending into marriage [6]. In this analysis, the marriage of the female characters in Disney’s female characters is inevitable to secure the female characters’ happiness and the male characters’ purpose as the bearer of the meaning. Both female and male characters suffer the same fate to make put forward the story to a happy ending but little to no information and personality traits were imbued to female characters which made them seen as objects that have no goals besides marriage.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. History of Disney’s animated films

As this research paper’s focus is Disney’s three animated feature films, it is important to know the history of Disney’s animated films history and how Disney’s ideology has shaped the films within. In his book, Zipes believes that Disney and fairy tales have worked together to reinforce the patriarchal symbolic order based on rigid notions of gender and society [7]. Therefore, Disney shaped the ideology of his “once upon a time” from the European fairytales, his American spirit, and technological skills to indirectly shape society’s mind that those fairytales and princesses are Disney’s [1]. Disney’s formula of “happily ever after” has proven as the successful ingredients of the films which are romance, finding true love, and ultimately marriage [8]. Cokely argues that the film ingredient has entangled in the

naturalization of heterosexuality [8]. This naturalized heterosexuality is evident in my first two movies that I will examine, *SW* and *BB*, but changed entirely in *Frozen*. Moreover, Disney artists create pleasure in looking at their heroines by using popular images of feminine beauty and youth when producing their characters, which creates societal myths of beauty within the template of “to be looked at” as visual pleasure[9]. According to Pallant, there are two eras where Disney tried to mature in animated films which are the *Early and Middle Disney era*, which consists of the Formalism and the transition; and the second one is the *Contemporary Disney* which consists of the Renaissance, Neo-Disney, and Digital Disney [10]. My choices of films that are being examined in this essay are going throughout the respective eras that are mentioned above. *SW* is made in 1937 where Disney films were in the Formalism era or Classic Disney era and it won an honorary Academy Award for Disney and acts as the first and original princess brand of Disney [9]. While *BB* and *Frozen* are included in the Contemporary Disney era. *BB* is one of the successful films in the Disney Renaissance era, an era between 1989-1999 where Disney industrially and aesthetically grew and produced lots of princesses animated films such as *Aladdin*, *The Little Mermaid*, and surely, *BB* [10]. It was nominated as Best Picture in Academy Award. While *Frozen* is included in the Digital Disney era and won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2013, and popular for its first successful woman director, Jennifer Lee. Therefore, here Disney has made a massive transition on the movies in how they change the stories and the characters within, and thus be perceived to the audiences.

There is a substantial amount of research papers, journals, and books written by scholars that have proven Disney’s animated feature films are too patriarchal in the Early Disney era, but drastically diminished in Contemporary Disney. From the narrative point of view, Disney has changed a lot from the strong presence of heterosexuality and patriarchy that was used in the early era and lessened a little bit in the Renaissance era and more in the digital era. In this paper, I will divide the analysis into two parts which are first, the enforced women characterizations that embody the patriarchal society to denote the male gaze and the structures of the movies that included narrative details in film scenes and songs.

3.2 Snow White, Male Gaze, and Gender Portrayal

In 1937, *SW* perfectly depicted the traditional role of woman. In the film, although there is a lack of male characterizations, male dominance and control can be perceived easily by the audiences through the depiction of Snow White as a character. Using the stereotypical princess depiction, the male gaze is perfectly seen inside. Snow White’s perfect human features with no ugly characteristics have dehumanized her to level and resonate with the male gaze and “what men want in woman” in the movie. Additionally, Snow White is also constructed as having no personalities and hobbies or pursuits in life as a woman [8]. Snow White’s perfect features are found in the description of her by Magic Mirror, voiced by a male actor, symbolizing an approval of her perfect beauty from the male’s perspective: “*A lovely maid, I see. Rags cannot hide her gentle grace. Alas, she is fairer than thee. Lips red as the rose. Hair black as ebony. Skin white as snow,*” (Magic Mirror in *SW* 1937). Not only that Snow White’s beauty is approved by Magic Mirror. The queen stepmother is also anxious about her beauty, thus asking the Magic Mirror’s approval with her famous line. “*Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?*” (Ibid. 1937). This implied that the queen’s beauty is already there, but needed validation from the male [11]. Snow White also implies the traditional woman who is helpless and submissive, domesticated by the male gaze. She positions herself to clean the castle’s steps, cook for the dwarfs, and clean the cottage. Snow White depicts the weak and passive woman in the story that needs a rescuer to actualize her happy ending. Moreover, the definition of love in the story is implied but not depicted:

“Snow White: I am wishing, for the one I love, to find me today.

Prince: Now that I’ve found you. One love that has possessed me. Of one love only for you.”

(Excerpt of Snow White and Prince sing a song, entitled *I’m Wishing/One Song*, *SW* 1937).

Here, the love between Snow White and the nameless prince is very fast in process since they only met twice; firstly, they met when Snow White sings in front of the castle's well and he serenades her, and secondly, when the prince, as active male, suddenly appears, kisses and, therefore, rescues Snow White. Here, Snow White acts as the object: a commodity and a prize for the prince to be won [6]. Moreover, the prince as the *bearer* of the meaningful story has come to rescue Snow White, advancing and concluding the story has a happy ending. Without the prince, Snow White would have slept forever in the glass coffin. There is no struggle from Snow White herself to make her happy ending, she only wishes in front of a wishing well as a passive woman, wishing to be found someday by her love. Adjusting with the Second World War and Great Depression Era, Disney made *SW* a new, simple, and easily communicable form of entertainment that can be watched by both adults and kids at that time, thus he represented the strict hierarchy of patriarchal by displaying masculinity and the predomination of male heroes and downplayed the importance of characterizations (personality traits and pursuits in life) of Snow White in the film [12][13].

Snow White is always seen as the first Disney princess who is a beautiful, passive, submissive, and sexual object that projects all his desires about a woman which makes the prince the bearer of the meaning. Without the prince, Snow White will always sleep in the glass coffin. Therefore, what Mulvey argues about the male gaze, and how the prince is so powerful and the bearer of the meaning is burdened in the male character which is the prince who saves Snow White from her downfall to her happy ending.

3.3 Beauty and the Beast and Disney's Progressive Approach

BB, released in 1991, is one of the best films in the Disney Renaissance era that can be seen as the progressive animated film made by Disney in regards to the depiction of roles and characterizations in the narrative. The film emerged as a piece that breaks the patriarchal system, took a post-feminism maneuver [13]. The transition started in this movie by giving a hobby and personality traits for Belle, as the main character (and later the princess) in the movie. Belle is depicted as a special character as she appears to be Disney's first and strongest feminist character [12]. Here, Belle is going against the traditional roles of women who should stay at home and be married. Belle is fond of reading books, she stands up for herself and she is dissatisfied by "the provincial life" she is in, longing for an adventurous life as she does not fit in in the village. In the scene, Belle goes to the market in the morning, but not to buy foods for cooking for her father, she goes to the library/bookshop, to return the book that she borrowed and borrow a new one.

"Baker: Where you off to?"

Belle: The bookshop. I just finished the most wonderful story about the beanstalk and an ogre and...(cut off by the baker)

Belle: I've come to return the book I borrowed.

Bookshop owner: Finished already?

Belle: I couldn't put it down. Have you got anything new? I'll borrow this one!

Bookshop owner: That one? But you've read it twice!

Belle: Well it's my favorite!

Belle: There must be more than this provincial life."

(Excerpt of Belle sings a song, entitled *Belle* in *BB* 1991).

Here, the Disney princess, Belle starts to transform from passive, submissive, and has no personality to a woman who likes to read, implying her intelligence. However, there is still patriarchal dominance in the story, depicted in the society as the people of the village who see and judge Belle as an odd person for her fondness of reading books. Although the villagers see Belle as peculiar, Disney still inserted the formula for Belle to be "looked at". Belle is described as the most beautiful woman in the village whose "looks have got no parallel". However, the villagers all agree that Belle is peculiar and odd; they all say that behind her back.

“Villager 1: But behind the fair facade, I’m afraid she’s rather odd, very different from the rest of us. She’s nothing like the rest of us. Yes, different from the rest of us is Belle.”

All Villagers: Look there, she goes a girl who’s strange but special. A most peculiar mademoiselle. It’s a pity and a sin. She doesn’t quite fit in. A beauty but a funny girl. That Belle”. (Ibid .1991).

However, Belle as a headstrong woman with personality stands up against society’s depiction of traditional woman roles. Other than the society that still embodies the patriarch system, Disney also produced masculinity, through macho man depiction, Gaston. Gaston is described as a man who is so powerful in every aspect of his life that needs the “final touch”, an accessory to his perfect life, which is Belle. This patriarchal belief is still seen in Gaston’s forceful behavior to get what he wants (Sherman 2014). Gaston believes that Belle should pay more attention to important things in her life such as her husband, rather than focusing on books. Gaston also advises Belle that, *“It’s not right for a woman to read. Soon she starts getting ideas and thinking...”*(BB 1991). Gaston’s existence is the root for Disney’s patriarchal hierarchy which signifies man as the *bearer* and male dominance for woman’s life in marriage which objectifies woman. However, this time, Belle is so headstrong, she argues Gaston: *“Gaston you are positively primeval”* (Ibid. 1991). Belle even rejects Gaston’s proposal and thus the idea of marriage, since she wanted much more than the provincial life/marriage, which is an adventure. The definition of love is also changed here. The love between Belle and Beast in the film is shown as a journey, rather than an instant romance or necessary ending, although at the end, the film concludes in romance. The process is shown clearly from two strangers that become friends, and then as lovers. Here, Belle forgets her desire for adventure, and in the end, marries the Beast/the nameless prince. There are two forms of power shown in the movie. The first form is the power of Belle’s father that possessed Belle, which then she is passed along to her husband, Beast. Belle, like a trophy, is “given” to Beast by Belle’s father, securing her position in society as a married woman, thus going back to the feminine role in society [8]. The second power, however, signifies the active female persona of Belle. She is not the one who is rescued by Beast, she is the one who does the rescuing, and she comes back to Beast because of her choice and promise, saving the desperate Beast from his death. Disney through *BB* has matured in the narrative details and characterization of women from damsel to heroin, resulted in major development in future Disney’s films, specifically, *Frozen*.

3.4 Gender Portrayal in Disney’s Frozen

Frozen, as the latest hit of Disney is considered Disney’s most compelling cinematic piece that not only acts as the highest-grossing animation picture of all time, it also redefined the woman roles in a film. Women roles in *Frozen* are changed, they are no longer damsels in distress that need men to rescue them. In *Frozen*, none of the female characters’ goals is to marry into safety [12]. The characterizations of both female leads are matured and detailed. Not only headstrong, Elsa and Anna also depict independent and ambitious women. Anna opposes the traditional notions of passivity that wait for a prince to save her. She goes to save her sister by herself; she saves herself and Kristoff (the romantic interest) when they are attacked by the wolves, and she also makes a joke about Kristoff’s business as ice seller is “a rough business to be in right now” (*Frozen* 2013). All of those connote the masculine traits such as her fearlessness, opinionatedness, and driven [13]. While Elsa exists as a self-empowered individual, which is a queen, no longer a princess. Elsa does not have and needs a male bearer or romantic interest. She is powerful as she is and does not need any man as her “happily-ever-after” to make her life meaningful. At the end of *Frozen*, no prince involvement saves Anna and Elsa [10]. The definition of true love is entirely transformed or seen from another point of view, which is true love from the familial bond in a form of sisterly affection and selfless love, which has replaced the old notion of “only true love’s kiss can save the day”. As the powerful climax of the rescue, Elsa is saved by selfless Anna, while Anna is saved by

Elsa's sisterly love; she takes control of her life, rather than waiting to be kissed by Kristoff, as the intended prince (*Frozen* 2013) [14]. This teaches the young generation the importance of finding happiness through oneself and not through the prince [10]. The idea of Snow White's instant true love is also contemplated by Elsa and Kristoff in the dialogue towards Anna's love/adoration to Hans. Firstly, Elsa states to Anna when she and Hans ask for Elsa's blessing in the party through a monologue and emphasis:

"You can't marry a man you just met" (*Frozen* 2013). Moreover, Kristoff also asks and contempt the idea of "marrying someone you just met" through a dialogue with Anna.

"Anna: I'd only just met him that day"

Kristoff: Wait, you got engaged to someone you just met that day? Didn't your parents ever warn you about strangers?"

Then Kristoff pokes fun and asks little details whether Anna knows her romantic interest such as Hans' last name, favorite food, foot size, whether she has had a meal with him, and if she does not like the way he eats (Ibid. 2013). Those little details in Kristoff's statement have transformed Disney's definition of love into a long process, not the instant one. Although *Frozen* seems like a feminist film, it still is encased in the romance ending, but now the active male/prince, Kristoff is seen as a friend, romantic companion; not as a necessary ending, but a journey, that consummated in Anna and Kristoff's love [16].

4. Conclusions

Disney has proven the shift of gender roles in those three films. From vacant, passive, and domesticated damsel such as Snow White who is an object to be gazed at by males, to the contemporary, bolder, and full of personality traits heroines such as Belle, Anna, and Elsa. In conclusion, through Disney's films, I have been taught to marry the "prince charming" to secure my position in society. My lack of understanding of women's capability in society has been perfected by Disney's ideology in *SW* and *BB* that women need to find their happy endings only with prince charming's help. A tenet of patriarchy was always privileged and the male gaze is not to be underestimated. This patriarchal system of male dominance in those films has shaped this notion in my head for years. However, as I grew up, watched *Frozen*, and wrote this essay, that old notion is progressively shifted just like Disney has progressed throughout the decades and become woke to the existence of outside their conservativeness, resulting in new adjustment for equality in both women and men roles in society. Thanks to Mulvey, her male gaze theory, and Disney's films that are transformed in a better way to depict the gender roles, and thus educate society about love, courage and as women who are no longer only passive and gazed at by males: women have power, and as equal as men.

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