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Changing World with Disney

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Abstract:

Disney movies or Disney characters need no introduction to anyone. The popularity of Disney can be easily seen among teenagers, especially among girls who imitate themselves to become one like the Disney Princess. However, behind every character there is a serious Gender stereotypical characteristic that is often ignored, but which Sub- consciously captures the mind of young girls. Nevertheless, as the World is changing their perspective towards women so as Disney. The contemporary Fairytales are empowering women and realizing their qualities that were often ignored or unacknowledged previously.

Keywords: Gender role, Disney Movies, Stereotypical Characters, Contemporary Era, Changing Roles

“Fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed.” G.K. Chesterton

The impact of a Fairytale upon a teenager could be perceived through the popularity of Disney movies. Since from a century Disney movies are a part of our world and they continue to live in our lives giving us a glimpse of another world, “The Fairytale World”. It has become a part of our culture and slowly and gradually is changing the role from just being a Fairytale to bedtime stories. Children love to imagine themselves as the protagonist of these tales. However, behind the innocent narration of a Fairytale, there exist serious stereotypical characteristics and moral behavior for both males and females that we usually fail to notice. Fairytale not only instruct females to be submissive and unassertive but also instruct males to be hulk like and always be commanding. To explain in a better way Judith Butler rightly observes, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender... identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results (Gender Trouble, 25). However, with changing times the Disney Fairytales have also changed their perspective towards their presentation of the gender roles. My attempt in this paper is to show how gendered roles are disintegrating and how the perception of Disney movies and the world is changing. In an attempt to prove my point, I have taken “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)”, “Cinderella (1950)”, “Mulan (1998)”, “Moana (2016)”.

The first movie produced by Walt Disney was “Snow white and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)” which was based on the German fairytale Sneewittchen published by Brothers Grimm in their collection of Grimm’s Fairy Tale. Snow White was a Princess but because of her stepmother’s jealousy, she was forced to live in a forest with seven dwarfs. The mother asks huntsmen to kill her though he was unable to do it and asks her to leave the castle, as her mother wants her to be dead. The mother has a magical mirror that reveals to her that she is alive and is in the forest. The wicked queen dresses herself as a hag and makes Snow White eat the poisoned apple because of which she falls in a slumber sleep only to be awakened by a Prince with “first love’s kiss.” Eventually she finds a Prince who kisses her and she is awakened.

The story is marvelous in portraying the human relationships, emotions, magic and the era of those times. However, if we attempt to go deep down in it we can see some serious gender description that tames the mind of a young girl. First thing is the concept of beauty, both the stepmother and daughter was beautiful but the Queen wants to be the most beautiful woman in the world. She has a magical mirror from which she can ask anything but the only thing she ever asked was, "Magic mirror in my hand, who is the fairest in the land?" to which the mirror replies, "My queen, you are the fairest here so true. But Snow White is a thousand times more beautiful than you." The reason behind the Queen’s decision to kill Snow White is her beauty. Beauty becomes more important than relationship, humanity and any other thing in the world.

Second is the projection of Prince as the only savior of Snow White and the concept of “Love at first sight.” The Prince falls in love with Snow White while she was in the slumber sleep because of her beauty and once he kisses her she is awake. Moreover, in the forest also, the seven Dwarfs protect her in return for the daily household works. In the entire journey, the males are helping her and the only female member she knows is the one who wants her to be dead. Thus, it gives the message that women cannot stand for their own and is dependent upon males to protect and guard her from any catastrophic situation. Similarly, “Cinderella or The Little Glass Slipper” is one of the most remembered Fairytales. The story has many variations but the most popular one was by the Brothers Grimm in their folk tale collection Grimm’s Fairy Tale. Cinderella was a kind, beautiful and a thoughtful girl. She lives with her stepmother and stepsisters who always make fun of her and she is demeaned as a mere servant in their house. One day the Royal Kingdom organizes a party so that the Prince could choose a girl to marry. However, the Prince does not want a girl who marries him for his money and status, so he disguises himself as a Page and the Page disguises as the Prince. Unaware of this fact all the girls including Cinderella’s stepsister appreciate the Page and not the Prince.

Although Cinderella was not allowed to attend the ball but the Fairy Grandmother magically turns her into a beautiful Princess and arranges a carriage for her to attend the party. Nevertheless, she is fearful of being recognized by her sisters so the Grandmother gives her a magical slipper so

that she will not be recognized by anybody but warns her to return before midnight otherwise the spell would be broken. Cinderella attends the ball and dances with the Prince but as the clock strikes midnight she runs away and because of hurry leaves her sandal in the castle. Finally, the Prince finds her through the help of Glass Slipper and they get happily married.

While a meticulous analysis of the story, displays deep fragments of stereotype in it. Her own stepmother and sisters are torturing Cinderella and she bears their cruel behavior because she is kind and generous.

Once upon a time there was a beautiful little girl named Cinderella who was loved by everyone. She was sweet, kind, and gentle”. She is “busy with sweeping, cleaning, washing, and dusting” but does nothing in response but sing about “dreams of happiness that she hoped would come true.

The theme that a “girl is another girl’s enemy” is being projected here once more. Moreover it also gives the message that stepmother is always cruel and bad. Cinderella was beautiful because she was kind and Drizella and Anastasia, the stepsisters, “could have been pretty, but their selfish, cruel natures made them look ugly.” The Prince on the other hand does not want a girl who just loves him for his money and royalty only. Ironically all the women in the ball neglect him as they think he is the Page, which means all the women want money and royalty and not the emotional bond that should exist between a bride and bridegroom. It is only Cinderella who realizes the true worth of a gentleman. The underlying thought presented here is that a girl gives priority to power and money and not to the intelligence, values and nature of men.

The Fairy Grandmother disguises Cinderella into a beautiful Princess which actually she was not. Her disguising reveals that the love is biased toward appearance of the women. Not only from her disguising but also from the fact that her sisters and other women in the party spend hours in making themselves appear attractive. Why can t the Prince fall in love with Cinderella for what she was? Why does she have to disguise into a beautiful perfect girl in order to win someone s heart. Cinderella’s harsh and unpleasant life comes to an end just after marrying a Prince that means if you marry someone your life problems will come to an end. The movie also gives the message that it is good to be forgiving no matter what happens by the act of Cinderella s forgiving her sisters for their deed.

However, that was the Era of 1950 when the feminists were fighting to make their own identity visible in the Male dominated society. Disney strives to change the narrative discourse of its movies with the movie “Mulan” (1998) by making its efforts to mark its presence in third wave feminism. The film was different from the other Disney movie in portraying women as “damsel in distress.” However, feminist were not so happy with this movie also as they argue the film

contains mark of cliché feminine characteristics. The film's plot takes place during the Han Dynasty, where Fa Mulan, daughter of aged warrior Fa Zhou, impersonates a man to take her father's place during a general conscription to counter a Hun invasion. In this movie, Disney depicts the florescent Chinese culture and its festivals with the revered Gods and Goddess. It also depicts the value of Dragon (Mushu) and preservice of culture among Chinese.

It was among the first movies in which girl tried to take stand not only for her but also for her family and the entire nation. Though she was disguised initially as a male as during those times women were not allowed to join the army for war but she proves her worth through her intelligence and fighting skill. Also at many points she saves the life of his love Li Shan and of the Emperor whose life was in danger. The Emperor himself says to Li Shan, “You don t meet a girl like that every dynasty”, which makes Shan realize the importance of her bravery and abilities.

The Emperor was impressed by her bravery and wanted to appoint her as an advisor of the state. Hence, the changing women’s role could be seen in this movie when the women is not get ashamed by her weakness but overpowers and masters it. However, the critics were not happy by the movie as they see the feminist trait in the behavior of Mulan and the fellow members. In the beginning, she is taught that woman bring honor to family if she is being married to a suitable male, “A girl can bring her family great honor in one way, by striking a good match...” The idea of Masculinity is prominently projected in the film that to win any war you need a good strength that is a peculiar characteristic of a male and that is why Mulan has to disguise herself as male. The lyric “I’ll Make a Man Out of You”, defines the power and strength of male. Moreover, Mulan disguises as Ping in order to be a part of the war and in order to show herself as a male she speaks in harsh and aggressive tone. Even after proving her worth and intelligence in war, she is commented as, “she’s a woman! She’ll never be worth anything!”

The inner desire of the male is also presented in the movie with the help of the song sung by the three boys while they were proceeding for the war:

Men want girls with good taste, calm, obedient/Who work fast-paced/With good breeding and a tiny waste/You'll bring honor to us all &/I couldn't care less what she'll/wear or what she looks like /It all depends on what /she cooks like /Beef, pork, chicken.

Then, Ping (Mulan) is asked what he would want in a girl in to whom he responds, “How 'bout a girl who's got a brain/ Who always speaks her mind?” The the faces of all the men’s show disgust and disappointment, and they reply with a solid, "NAH!" These ideas make a women

think that it is not worth to be knowledgeable and possess qualities but being passive and submissive. Even when she returns home after saving the Emperor of China his father happily says, "The greatest gift and honor is having you for a daughter" but her grandmother still utters, "Great, she brought home a sword. If you ask me she should have brought home a man." Mulan who denies the royal post offered by the Emperor to be back home is also critiqued as no matter what female do in her life she should get back to look after her family and home in the end.

However, with its latest creation "Moana" Disney breaks all the stereotypes by not only empowering women but also portraying the uniqueness of different culture. They shift from the white centric beauty to a more normal girl with whom every girl can relate herself. The protagonist of the film not only goes to voyage to save the mother earth but also finds her identity and true worth. In the beginning itself, she says, I am not a Princess thus breaking the cliché projection of the women as a Princess. She is brave and ambitious and listens to her heart despite of being stopped by her father. She is a daughter of a Polynesian island chief and performs her duties very well. "Through this project, Disney reached into the entire Pacific region and cherry picked here and there to create this fantasy of Polynesia," Anne Keala Kelly, a Native Hawaiian filmmaker and journalist, told NBC News. She was asked not to leave the Island and should be happy and content with whatever she had but her heart persuades her to leave the Island and search for some goal in her life. This can be seen as a metaphor for all the other women who had been asked not to leave their home in search for some goal in their life and Moana's resistance to that idea breaks the cultural notion that is being implicated (placed) upon women.

The movie also discards the idea of male as the only savior of a woman in distress as it was Maui who left Moana in between the sea when she was trying to fix Te Fiti's heart only to be come back later when he realizes his mistake. Another thing added by Disney is how man (the Man has destroyed) destroyed mother earth for his own selfish motives. Moana is not based on any love theme, or upon a woman who is struggling to find her Prince charming but to achieve goals in her life. As the Grandmother rightly says, "The question you keep asking yourself who are you meant to be?" The core essence of the movie lies in Te Fiti stolen heart that gives life to the island thus it gives significance and respect to women as a nurturer and life giver in real life. In the beginning, there was only ocean until the mother island emerged with the greatest power ever known--it could create life. It was Maui, a demigod who stole the heart and disappeared only to be tracked down by Moana to save the island from becoming barren and destructive.

Moana accomplish (accomplishes) her goals through hard work and determination which makes her triumph of modern feminism. "See the line where the sky meets the sea? It calls me/And no one knows, how far it goes/If the wind in my sail on the sea stays behind me/One day I'll know, if I go there's just no telling how far I'll go". As the era changes the Disney movies perception

also changes towards the issue of women. With the modern world, Disney also empowers women as it persuades persuade them more towards their goal and not towards love or household chores.

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