

Evolution of Disney Princesses and Its Impacts on Gender Roles and the Portrayal of Love Among Young Girls

JiaYu Sun*

Wuxi United International School, Wuxi, Jiangsu, 214101, China

Abstract. The three waves of feminism had an impact on how Disney princesses were portrayed. Since the 1950s, women have been portrayed as Disney princesses in the quest for gender equality and the reversal of traditional gender norms. This paper is based on a literature review. The paper would analysis the image of Disney princesses in three major eras, and refine the female characters shown in each film to study the different stages presented by Disney princesses, which further presents the impacts on gender roles and the portrayal of love. From the Classic princess, to the awakening of female consciousness, and eventually becoming an independent and brave queen, Disney princesses have undergone three metamorphoses. Women and men started to achieve equal roles, the gender roles switched from women working at home to women starting to pursue their careers. For Disney princesses, they are no longer obsessed with the pursuit of love and marriage, they begin to have more ways to achieve self-actualization.

1. Introduction

Disney has produced numerous thought-provoking, society-critiquing movies which subtly comment on the ideology of the society they were made. Disney is important not only because it is making great steps towards women's rights in society, but also because it is creating free-spirited princess figures that are popular among children. Children, especially girls idolize these princesses by wearing the same dress, acting like them and mimicking them. Disney princesses shaped the character of the children that watch in a subtle way, because girls want to be like the princesses they see on screen. The Disney princess movies are among their most popular because they largely reflect the ideals of the society in which they were produced. In other words, films that are financially successful are a statement of the beliefs that were prevalent at the time they were produced. The thesis focuses on the research question "Evolution of Disney Princesses and Its Impacts on Gender Roles and the Portrayal of Love Among Young Girls". The purpose of this paper is to investigate how the characterization of Disney princesses changed over the three major periods of feminism, and how Disney princesses influence gender roles and the portrayal of love.

2. Evolution of Disney Princesses

Disney crowns the female leads in the regular movies as "princesses" before the "princesses" in the Disney Princess series become "princesses," therefore not all of them are princesses in the traditional sense of the word. These "princesses" include real princesses with pure

royal blood, such as Snow White, Princess Rapunzel, and others; "princesses" who married a prince in a non-royal capacity to acquire their princess status, such as Belle and Tiana; daughters of historic tribal chiefs, such as Pocahontas and Moana; and regular girls from ordinary backgrounds who did not marry into a royal family, such as Mulan. These female characters, with different identities and images, were officially "crowned" by Disney. They eventually became Disney's officially authorised princesses.

The way the female form is presented by Disney in the first two eras reflects the current socio-cultural assumptions of what the female body should portray. From Snow White's 1937 image, which was wholly domestic and dependent, to Merida's 2012 portrayal, which is bold and unrestrained, Disney films have made enormous improvements in how they portray women. The evolution of Disney princesses can be divided into three different eras, the first era is the Classic Princesses, represented by Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Cinderella (1950), and Sleeping Beauty (1959) [1]. The Classic Princesses are the perfect "family angel", and they are beautiful, innocent, kind and gentle, and good at housework. They are full of longing for love and marriage, waiting for the prince's salvation. The second era is the Awaken Princesses, represented by The Little Mermaid (1989), Beauty and the Beast (1991), Aladdin (1992), Pocahontas (1995), and Mulan (1998) [2]. The Awaken Princesses have different images and come from different cultures. They have an independent, rebellious spirit, although there are still illusions about love, but has achieved some independence. They began to have independent personality, pursue freedom, and gradually free themselves from patriarchal thought. The

* Corresponding author: 1910821204@mail.sit.edu.cn

third era is the Independent Princesses, represented by *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), and *Frozen* (2013) [3]. The Independent Princesses have fully awakened their independent consciousness, no longer waiting for romantic love, and have a sense of self-pursuit. They really play their own ability, no longer rely on others, and rely on their own strength to let go of the fight. Their appearance subverts the traditional fairy tale model.

2.1 The First Era

Instead of acquiring all kinds of social information like men, women are frequently educated on how to be a good "lady" before marriage and how to become a "good wife and mother" after marriage. Stereotypes are used by the mass media as the primary tool for ideological indoctrination. Under patriarchal social norms, women are usually expected to live without thinking and accept whatever life gives them. Over the years, the characterization of Disney Princesses has evolved and redefined alongside the evolution of feminism. The narrative became more powerful as women started to gain a stronger voice in society. Although *Snow White* is set in Germany in the 1500s, when it was first released in 1937, it was very much a picture of life for women in America. The ideal female figure at the time was *Snow White* since women were taught that their place was in the house. Her house is the only place she feels secure. The outside world is frightening and rife with hidden peril. Her security comes from being in charge of her home, where she provides food, cleans, and cares for people. Furthermore, a man ultimately intervenes to save her life. In *Snow White*, the societal perceptions of the time are described; this illustrates how the public receives messages through fiction. *Snow White* dreams in a well; *Princess Aurora* says, "If you dream the same dream over and over again, it will come true"; and *Cinderella* says, "Believe in your dream, one day the clouds will lift, no matter how sad you feel, as long as you believe, your dream will come true." These people have their own goals, but instead of going after them, they decide to wait for them to come true. They chose to put up with the persecution and evil curses of their stepmothers despite their displeasure, even when they are either famous women or of pure royal lineage. When *Snow White* finds out that her stepmother, the Queen, will kill her, she has no choice but to run into the forest. *Sleeping Beauty* is told that she is engaged by the three fairies. Sad and frustrated, she is forced to accept the reality of her situation and return to the palace to fulfil her engagement. In the face of all this, even if they do not want to, they simply accept it in silence, without the slightest resistance. The only difference is that, compared to the previous two, *Cinderella* has a few "little thoughts" of her own, and she knows how to use how she looks to paralyse the enemy, hide and avoid being oppressed any further. She doesn't express her opinions or try to rebel against her stepmother until just before the "blind date" dinner party, which will determine whether she marries and starts a family. It is

clear that these female characters must accept in order to live calm lives because resistance is useless and ineffectual. They simply wait, even though they have dreams and wish for marriage. They are sure to receive assistance from others since they are attractive, frail, gentle, and skilled at housework. Only the prince's coming will transform their lives and grant them the joy of their desires.

2.2 The Second Era

The second wave of the feminist movement began in the 1960s, and during this time, women of all classes, races, and nationalities, including those from the Third World and White women, were aware of feminism [4]. Global feminists focus more on the philosophy of women's liberation and work toward gender equality in social rights. The increase in this trend has assisted in changing the public's stereotypes about gender and how women are portrayed in the media. After 30 years, the Disney Princess series was revived in 1989 with the release of *The Little Mermaid*, which mainly shattered the traditional princess image that the previous three films had established. *The Little Mermaid*, with her red hair and blue eyes, was the first woman to shatter the constraints of conventional "patriarchy," pursue the life she yearned for on land, and act decisively in the face of love. Since then, she has developed a number of princesses representing other racial groups, social classes, and nations. These include *Hua Mulan*, a Chinese civilian, *Pocahontas*, a primitive black tribal girl, *Belle*, a French village girl, and other individuals with various personalities. Each of these female characters has a distinct personality and aspirations. The family's private sphere is no longer the only place where people come to understand their worth as individuals. They start looking for more self-realization in a larger public setting. For instance, *Ariel* from *The Little Mermaid* depicts how women were perceived at the period in society. America has come to terms with the break from the nuclear family and a woman's work outside the home in the 1980s. In quest of her fate, *Ariel* departs the sea. She put herself through a lot for someone else's dream—being with a man. This is a clear illustration of how, in 1980s America, women were still expected to marry and have children in order to achieve self-actualization. Popular movies from the second era represent the fact that women can be independent of a man but society has not yet recognized this idea.

During this time, a number of Disney princess movies featured female imagery from various nations, races, and social classes on the electronic screen, from the red-haired *Little Mermaid* to the Chinese *Mulan* [5]. Both the exterior appearance and the internal personality are extremely personal traits that are brave to break free from the constraints of conventional standards. Each female role has abandoned the former beautiful, meek, and weak princess image. The following female characters are more sensible and proactive under the strain of reality to struggle against tradition and tyranny, in contrast to the *Little Mermaid's* emotional resistance

when in a state of rage. Similar to the early feminists who took the initiative to challenge the old patriarchal society at this time, they ventured to challenge the stereotype of women that had been instilled in masculine discourse for thousands of years as well as the demands and constraints placed on women. They thought about the philosophical bases for treating women as property.

2.3 The Third Era

The growth and consolidation of feminism have significantly altered how women are perceived in society. The 21st century has brought about a new era in which society has given women more possibilities and privileges. Women now place a greater emphasis on improving themselves and being ideal. Additionally, they focus on encouraging peaceful interactions with other people and things. The whole population begins to understand that women are capable of doing anything a man is and do not require a guy to validate their worth. Today, women have the freedom to determine their own destiny, to be whoever they want to be and to do anything they want to do.

In parallel, female characters in films of all genres have become more self-reliant. The new female characters in Disney's princess series have a tendency to be "capable persons" with unique skills, like Rapunzel's healing powers or Elsa's control over ice and snow, or, like Tiana and Merida, they are affected by magic in some other way.

These supposedly "magical" goods themselves present both a risk and a chance. Only after completing self-examination and perfection can the princess in the movie experience the "magic" ultimate victory. The princesses' inner development is facilitated by this process of self-reflection and self-improvement. Additionally, all of the films of this period, whether they are about romantic relationships or familial ties, have as their major theme the narrative style of altering one's perception via conflict and obtaining peace and perfection through mutual understanding [6]. For instance, when Tiana and the Prince are transformed into frogs, they go from being unhappy to loving and understanding one another as they work to find answers. A disagreement between Merida and her mother results in a crisis. However, it helps them better understand one another and achieve successful reconciliation.

Two female lead characters and Elsa, the first Disney princess monarch, are featured in the movie Frozen [7]. Elsa possessed a strong capacity to manage ice and snow from birth and was able to do so at a young age. But after accidentally hurting her younger sister, she started to be afraid of her own abilities. In traditional patriarchal societies, strong women are viewed as terrifying and as potential global catastrophes. In this patriarchal society, the father is at the center and has unrestricted access to the microphone. Elsa decides to trust and comply with her father's request in order to keep her power hidden. She ultimately decides to leave the castle. Elsa disobeys her father's instructions and heads for the lonesome mountain. She rejects becoming a "perfect girl" in

accordance with the norms of patriarchal society and breaks free from the constraints of her father's male remarks. In contrast to her earlier attempts to stifle them, Elsa's environment in the mountains is now largely decked with snow and crystal, with a feminine palette of soft, delicate colors rather than being full of jagged teeth and claws. The entire planet is fantastic and stunning. It is clear that feminists can only repress masculine discourse for a limited period of time, and even then, it will have a negative effect and fuel even more vehement opposition.

3. Impacts

3.1 Gender Roles

In a patriarchal culture, men control positions of power, masculine discourse predominates, and women can only be content if they are dependent on men. In these movies, the male characters often get less time on screen than the female ones do [8]. But they command attention. The male characters in the first era have the difficult task of rescuing the women. Because their father continues to protect them after their mother passes away and because they are not intimidated by a stepmother, Snow White and Cinderella both have happy childhoods. But when kids lose the security of their strong father, they start to experience persecution.

Additionally, in Snow White, both the seven dwarfs who take Snow White in and the hunters who leave due to the princess's soft heart accept credit for protecting her [9]. The father and the onlooker male figures simply serve to defend the women's own way of life and existence however the husband's position dramatically transforms the princesses' lives. All throughout the film, the princesses sing about how they long to meet their prince because they realize that this is the only way to successfully and completely change their life and find happiness. The Princess is saved by the prince just when she needs him most, and after they get married, he helps her start a new, happy life. This gives the impression that men only play a minor or incidental role in the entire movie. But in the end, men have the most influence on the princesses' life. The men in the movie are totally autonomous people who are even closely connected to the social power structure. They dominate the women's living environment and exert a significant amount of influence there. All these enhancements to the lives and privileges of the female characters are provided by the males through marriage and family. In such a scenario, the individuality and independence of female characters are further undermined.

The male protagonists in the five films, which span from The Little Mermaid to Mulan, are no longer the absolute monarchs or princes at the epicenter of male authority in a straightforward traditional patriarchal society [10]. The connotation of men of various classes and races is complete, demonstrating the environment and personality diversity of the male pictures, and they are no longer the ultimate emblem of authority portrayed solely by exterior images. The male discourse is

prioritized in a patriarchal culture. As a result, the majority of male characters are represented as pure or innocent in conventional society's literature and art, precisely like the heroic and perfect existence of the prince Disney first imagined. Prince Alec continues to portray the stereotypical princely role in these works, with the exception of *The Little Mermaid*. Due to the prince's appearance as the "Beast's" external depiction in *Beauty and the Beast*, the roles of "princesses" objects of love are no longer solely attributed to princes. The protagonist of *Aladdin*, a wealthy but dishonest tramp; Chamais, an army captain traveling by ship in *Pocahontas*; and Li Xiang, the son of a military general who is promoted to the rank of lieutenant in *Mulan* are examples of male characters with varied forms and personalities that develop throughout the story. In both the first and the last two movies, descriptions of the "Beast" prince repeatedly highlight his haughtiness, selfishness, and cruelty. The appearance of Belle alters the circumstance. The Beast transforms into a more "human" version of himself, losing some of his dark underlying qualities and moving closer to the stereotypical picture of a prince. The character of *Aladdin* is dramatic and paradoxical. Due to the fact that he is being pursued and will not give up, he steals a loaf of bread. He forgoes the bread, however, after observing two destitute orphans who are starving. He becomes into a new man after Princess Jasmine shows up, and his true self is redefined. Zhuang Hans and Li Xiang are both soldiers, however, they are of different races. They are obstinate and combative, but they are also readily constrained by conventional beliefs.

Women are viewed as property in traditional patriarchal countries and are assumed to be the private property of the family, including parents, uncles, and husbands, unless others are present. These paternal roles are organized and controlled in such traditional communities because it makes sense and is assumed. Because the father is the ultimate authority in the private realm of the family in a patriarchal culture, women do not have a voice in the home. The 'princesses' in the five movies, however, make the decision to disagree with and rebel against their father's plans for their future marriage and way of life. The majority of these father figures have strong opinions and stress their right to talk at length. The "princesses" who crave for freedom and dreams have emancipated themselves from the deeply ingrained impact of patriarchal societal notions on women's thoughts in response to the "patriarchal" expectations that clash with their aspirations. They refuse to maintain the status quo and engage in "patriarchal" behavior by defending their privileges. Such a story is most accurately intended to critique patriarchal society. Gaston, a hefty suitor, is also included in *Beauty and the Beast* as a way to contrast the Beast. Gaston is the sole hunter in the community, is intelligent and affluent, tall and attractive, and meets all the requirements for a traditional marriage. Many of his attitudes are typical of traditional male ideals, such as valuing women's appearance, banning them from reading, and expecting them to conform to the ideal, male-centered "good wife and mother". This stereotypically masculine figure ends

up becoming the movie's antagonist. The conventional male position is not appreciated in the social ideologies of today. This modification also contributed to the princess in the movie having a "rebellious" look.

3.2 Portrayal of Love

The family is built on marriage. Additionally, several movies have honored this concept. The princesses secretly long for a blissful and lovely union. The first encounter between Snow White and the Prince, *Cinderella* only has a ball's worth of time, and *Sleeping Beauty* only has a song's worth of time. The Princess sang about "love at first sight" is a long-lasting true love. Their "angelic" attractiveness and exceptional looks serve as the essential catalyst for love at first sight.

Disney has been advocating "love at first sight" for more than fifty years, with films ranging from the original *Snow White* to *The Little Mermaid*. The Duke and the Lord are lovely angels, and the prince is attractive, but this kind of love frequently rests on physical attractiveness. The conventional love-at-first-sight pattern is no longer applicable to the prince until *Beauty and the Beast*, when he appears as the "Beast", and the traditional strong masculine role has transformed [11]. The Beast's positive view of Belle gives him the ability to change. The main character, Belle, also finds hope in getting along with the Beast and letting go of her biases. They eventually start dating, which absolutely defies the notion of love at first sight. While the Beast is an outsider among the princes, Belle is an oddity in the traditional patriarchal society. They are similar in that they both enjoy reading and can reason well. Belle, who once sang in her song about "Prince Charming," makes a sensible choice. She chooses the hideous and terrifying Beast over the charming suitor Gaston. Because the Beast is more in tune with her own ideals and perceptions—ugly on the outside but richer in the heart—Gaston will simply attempt to control her and escalate the struggle. The Beast, on the other hand, makes a logical decision to control his aggressive nature when making a life-or-death choice. The two fall in love naturally in this environment of respect and tolerance for one another.

In contrast to the common love and dream of the late 20th century, with the promotion of women's rights and the integrity of personal ideology in the 21st century, more and more women have realized the importance of personal dreams other than marriage and family, and have listed them in their own life plans, essentially differentiating them from love. For example, Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog* hopes to become an entrepreneur and open her own restaurant, so she takes part-time jobs day and night to save money. Rapunzel in *Rapunzel* wants to leave the tower to see the palace lantern, but her "mother" tells her that "the outside world is too terrible" and that she "can't survive on her own", so she learns all sorts of life skills and even martial arts in the tower in order to constantly enrich and improve herself. Tiana and Rapunzel have had clear goals since they were children and have a deep understanding of

their own situations and circumstances. As a result, they both devote themselves wholeheartedly to fulfilling their dreams. The love in their lives is very coincidental. The appearance of the male protagonist can only be attributed to chance; at the beginning of their meeting, no love spark is ignited, and they even reject each other slightly because they don't understand each other. The rest of the story also stems from Tiana and Rapunzel's desire to fulfil their dreams: The Prince lures Tiana with money in exchange for a kiss; Eugene offers Rapunzel a tiara in exchange for showing her the lantern. Even in the process of getting along with the hero, it is always the dream that drives Tiana and Rapunzel forward, and it is only after they have gone through various experiences to get to know each other that love begins to blossom.

4. Conclusion

Films have always been one of the ways of commenting and reflecting the ideologies of society in different periods of time, especially Disney films, which are continuously produced since the 1950s. Disney princesses are undoubtedly a representation of women in different stages of feminism. Feminism's growth has aided in the societal women's ideology shift, creating a more peaceful cultural phenomenon. Additionally, it has pushed for a change in how women are portrayed across media. In some ways, the ongoing transformation of women's representation in Disney princess films reflects shifts in gender norms and women's cultural representation as a result of societal context in various historical times. With the complete development of the social economy, culture, and other industries, today's women are more concerned with safeguarding their own personal image and rights as a result of the advancement of women's self-awareness and the shift in their discursive power. In many media platforms, female representations have grown more autonomous and independent. This paper explains how Disney princesses affect the changing gender roles in society and the portrayal of love among young girls by demonstrating the evolution of Disney princesses from the first era to the most recent third era.

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