Feminist Perspective On Animated Films: A Study To Examine The Change In Portrayal Of Female Leads

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Abstract: Animated Films have been applauded and have garnered much fan following and acclaim owing to their creativity. The stories in the films tend to have a lasting impact on the minds of the audience and have influenced generations to take inspiration from the characters and stories. The stories have effected traditions, cultural values and gender norms across societies.
It is in the wake of the huge impact that these films tend to exercise on the minds of the audience especially the impressionable children, thereby shaping their moral and value systems, that the films are often subjected to a lot of scrutiny in their role in the lives of the audience and their effect on their thought processes. These films, especially from the yesteryears, have been ridiculed for their glorification of male machismo and portrayal of female lead as a damsel in distress that requires saving by the hero of the film. Also the cliched depiction of beauty standards is another factor that adds to the ridicule.
This study examines the popular animated films from Hollywood and studies the depiction of the female lead in the films. The study finds that there has been a lot of difference in how the female lead was depicted in old times and the female lead in the animated films in recent years. This signals a paradigm shift in the way women are represented in films and kind of influence they have on the societal values.

1. INTRODUCTION

Movies have a great impact on its viewers and has a major role in disseminating and delivering information to the people. It grabs and holds the attention of target audience and simultaneously works toward developing, shaping and changing the opinion to some extent. All, including children are exposed to this form of media and absorbs information from it. Though children are more inclined towards animation films but with the easy availability and accessibility of various platforms the inclination and exposure is elevating day by day.[1]

Children are always curious and with the passing time becoming more informed and aware too. They learn a lot through animation films and try to adopt the lifestyle and imitate the characters they watch. The learning from animation films is no more limited up to the understanding about lifestyle and dialogues of the characters but has gone beyond that. The understanding about human gender, gender behavior is one of them. As a result, the content including all the elements of mise-en-ecene have now become questionable because any wrong construction, depiction can have worse impact on the learning and development of children.

Just like other forms of media, portrayal of female in animation films is also under scrutiny. And always has been a matter of concern since animation movies have impact on the development of children. The various dimensions and depths of the issue have been discussed on various platforms. The physical, social and cultural factors associated with the construction and depiction of female character in animation films has enjoyed a wide space in the landscape of journalism and literature. Over the time, portrayal of female in animation films has witnessed a change. The representation of female as a damsel in distress waiting for a male character (mainly the prince) for her help has now changed into powerful, self-sufficient, self-dependent character. The female characters in animation films are now shown stronger, powerful and have other priorities than love unlike old depiction. The alternative portrayal, which is different from the stereotypical representation of female in animation films hold the capacity to influence and leave a strong impact on its viewers. But the degree of this change in the representation is less and needs more attention to bring an apparent change.[1]

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the portrayal of women in animated hollywood films over years.

2. To examine the nature of change in portrayal of women characters in animated films.

3. To understand the social implications and impact of animated films on audiences.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Danielle Morrison in his paper titled "Brave: A Feminist Perspective on the Disney Princess Movie", comments about the portrayal of Princess Merida in movie Brave, where strong and concrete depiction of female lead has been shown. Princess Merida shown as a strong heroin in the film is a source of inspiration. The strong portrayal of female lead in this film is sending an important message of seeing female above the stereotypical image which has been created in the society. The various shades and unique motives of female lead in the film are remarkable and leave audience with different perspective.[2]

In their paper "Marketing feminism in youth media: A study of Disney and Pixar animation", Kristen Schiele, Lauren Louie, Steven Chen talk about the use of feminism for marketing. They state that representation of gender and issues associated with them has become a tool of marketing and majorly young female consumers are being targeted. They have emphasized on smart manipulation and integration of feminist message in the Disney and pixar animated films which hits and influence the young female consumers and also takes mainstream consumers in the loop without making them feel left out. Their study also highlights the use of feminist approach, variety of ideologies, strong and concrete depiction of female lead by Disney for their success. [1]

Amy M. Davis in his book "Good girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation", has tried to chalk out the difference between the construction and depiction of female lead in the Disney's animated movies. The book comments on the construction of their character in the animation films. The author in the book explains how Disney has tried to portray the stereotypical image of female characters in their films. Also the book comments over the degree to which the stereotypical image of female lead has been shaped in animated films by Disney. [3]

According to the research performed by Suzanne Alblas for her paper "Alternative female portrayals in animated movies: The impact of strong animated women on the viewing audience" reveals the different portrayals of female in animated films. The study discusses the impact and influence of different representation of female character on its viewers. The research also tries to unveil the capability of alternative portrayal of female in developing, shaping and changing the old perception of female in the society. [4]

McKenzie Barber in his research work "Disney's Female Gender Roles: The Change of Modern Culture" has specifically scrutinize Disney films to understand the representation of female characters in animated films. The researcher manages to uncover the difference in the portrayal of women and its influence on the viewers. The researcher states that Disney has changed the depiction of their female princess over the time. Also the changes in ideologies, beliefs, priorities and attitude of female characters have been witnessed which has contributed in Disney's success and motive of enlightening its viewers. [5]

Research Methodology
The paper is a review and analysis of previous papers on the topic and uses observation and secondary method of data collection and analysis.

Discussion and Analysis
Animated films are one of the most popular genres in films. It is due to their creativity and their storytelling prowess that they are absolute favorites across age, societies and cultures. Animated films have influenced entire generations to act, look and behave in certain manner. They hold a special place in the hearts of film lovers and have also for that very reason been subjected to critical scrutiny.

While some of these films can be lauded for their creativity, stories and technological advancements, a critical examination of the content reveals some serious flaws in the depiction of the characters especially the stereotypical portrayal of male and female leads.

We will, in this section, critically scrutinize the characters of some of the most popular animated films from all epochs to understand how the portrayal of women have changed in these films over time.

Cinderella (1950)

A classic fairytale, Cinderella is the story of poor oppressed orphan who attends a ball hosted by the prince and is finally able to escape the clutches of her evil step-mother. Cinderella is more beautiful, creative, charming and intelligent than her step sisters but is forced into servitude at her own house after her father dies in an accident. She comes to know of a ball hosted by the prince which her step- mother doesn't want her to attend but using help from her friends and her fairy godmother she is able to make it to the ball. She escapes hurriedly from the ball as she is cursed that her magical gown and carriage would disappear by midnight. In the process, she leaves behind her glass sandal in the stairs. The Prince is bewitched by her charm and searches his whole kingdom for her. Eventually, he finds her and frees her from the clutches of her evil step-mother. While at the first glance, nothing much seems to be awry with the story, many scholars have argued that the depiction of Cinderella as a weakling and somebody that needed rescuing is very unfair. Its is eventually her beauty and charm that changes her fate and she has to wait for the prince the make her life better.

Sleeping Beauty (1959)

Another classic fairy tale, Sleeping Beauty is a tale of a young girl cursed into unconsciousness by an evil witch. When the little princess is born, the evil witch puts a curse on her that she will be put to a deathly sleep on her 17th Birthday after she pricks her hand in a spinning needle. Her slumber will only be broken by the kiss of her saviour prince and if that doesn't happen within a stipulated period of time, she would die. She must seek the help of three fairies for the same. Firstly, the extreme depiction of good and bad as fairies and witches is very unrealistic. The witch's side of story is completely sidelined and she is shown as someone inherently evil. Also the need of a prince to rescue the damsel in distress is another stereotypical depiction and belittles the female character. The story however was more fairly presented in the much recent film 'Maleficent' which is more relatable, fair to both genders and has a fairer depiction of the characters too.

Beauty and the Beast (1991)

Beauty and the Beast is a over- romanticized tale of a prince cursed to live as a beast in a castle who falls for a beautiful girl and captures her to be able to win her love. The film and its story has been ridiculed for number of reasons. Firstly, it romanticizes kidnapping and abduction in the name of love which is a very dangerous trend to set. Owing to this glorification of male machismo and this ill-representation of how one ought to behave in love, many societies have suffered. Secondly, the female lead is again a weakling who can't protect herself and requires rescuing. Also it glorifies Stockholm Syndrome and justifies it.

Pocahontas (1995)

Pocahontas is a coming off age tale and is a film that signals the paradigm shift in depiction of characters in animated films. Pocahontas is groundbreaking in a number of ways and breaks the stereotypes set so far by the other films quite effectively. The girl Pocahontas is depicted as a strong character who can accomplish a lot of tasks traditionally reserved for men and is also a strong voice of reason. When the colonizers take over her land and invade it, she plays crucial role in preventing a war between her tribe and the colonizers by reaching out to both sides and helping them to see each other as two different cultures who can strive for mutual respect. She eventually falls for a colonial soldier and her liaison with him too is instrumental in him and effectively his whole party being able to understand the way of life of the tribe.

Mulan (1998)

Mulan is another groundbreaking tale of a girl who joins the army and strives to protect her family and her land. This very inspiring story begins when the country that Mulan lives in is under seige and the ruler announces that all soldiers, young and old, must return to battlefield to protect the country and its honor. Every family is bound to send at least one man to the army to fight. Women are not allowed. Mulan's father is very old and she has no brother which puts the family in a tough spot. Her father is sure to be killed in the fierce battle if he goes so she takes a bold decision that she will join the army disguised as a man so that her father can stay safe in his old age. Her valor and wit in the battle makes her the hero in the battle and eventually she shines bright as a star breaking all gender stereotypes.

Tangled (2006)

Tangled is the story of Rapunzel, the girl with lengthy golden locks who is imprisoned in a tower by an evil witch who claims to be her mother. The girl falls for a man who, in the traditional story, then rescues her from the witch. Tangled, however, is a more modern approach to the Rapunzel story. The girl is chirpy, bright and skilled. She befriends a thief. Her new friend tells her of lands far and beyond which arouses in her the desire for adventure. She sets out to explore the world. The thief, her friend, is always by her side but is never the central male character who Rapunzel is dependent on. He is her support system but she maintains her individuality. Also, the romance is never too heavy. The heroine takes care of herself and rights the wrong by herself.

Frozen (2013)
The film revolves around family and relationships as opposed to love and romance. The story has two sisters at the nucleus and it narrates a journey of their finding each other and their strengths. It would seem that Frozen is a progressive issue that breaks many stereotypes and undoubtedly, it does shatter some. Two female leads instead of a male and female lead, princess sisters saving each other instead of being saved by their princes, revolving of the plot around family not romance, a promise of romance and not its actuation being the focus are some of the old cliches that are not found in Frozen. These aspects in the storyline make it refreshing and were the hugely responsible for the success and popularity of Frozen.

Moana (2016)
Another refreshing story of an adventure loving girl who sets out on a mission to save her land and her people. The story has no heavy and over-the-top romantic angle which is very unique. Also it takes into account the environmental issues and symbolically implores the audience to be more sensitive towards mother nature. Moana braves the nature's elements all by herself and is a very intelligent girl with strong values. Moana isn't merely feminist but also a very sensible film as it depicts mother nature as all powerful and mighty.

4. CONCLUSION

A careful scrutiny of the material available and the films clearly demonstrates the paradigm shift from a more hero- centric approach to fairy tales to a more feminist approach which depicts all characters in fairly reasonable manner. The heroines of yore were quintessential damsels in distress who required a hero to save them. This was considered to be unfair portrayal of women and was also detrimental to the inculcation of social values in young impressionable girls. The recent films are more fair to women and showcase female characters that are independent, strong and capable of making their own choices. This shift in characterization is very significant as the films are a mirror of the society and this shift is a harbinger of the change in social order that has begun to take effect.

5. REFERENCES:

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