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Disney Classics between Feminism and Victimization of Women: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the two contradictory themes of feminism and victimizing women in Disney Classics, a series of films which are based on famous fairy tales and the development of the changes undergone by these stories over time. The study is carried out through an analysis of the themes of the stories with a critical feminist approach in three chronological stages. Previous studies have explored these themes, but no report to date has used a chronological approach to compare the significance of the mentioned themes with the stages of feminism. These stories develop in line with developments in society and widen their perspective when examined through a feminist lens, and this change is also reflected in the Disney treatments of these tales. Despite the similarities in the plots of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Little Mermaid*, the representations of the voice and agency of the female characters in these films differs significantly, especially in the case of *Snow White*.

Keywords. disney, classics, feminism, victimization, women, historical analysis

1. Introduction

The term “Disney Classics” refers to the series of animated films produced by Disney Studios between 1930 and 1985-1990. Examples of these films include *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *The Little Mermaid* (1989). While these films differ terms of plot, characters, themes and settings, a deeper examination of their plots reveals that they share the same formulae, plot maps and ideologies. The protagonists are always heroines who share a similar appearance of the beautiful, good natured, modest, quiet and morally upright young woman. At some point in the narrative, they fall in love with a high-ranking man who will become their savior or “Prince Charming” after a series of unexpected dangerous situations. In examining these films analytically, it is possible to identify many other shared features and this study will analyze these similarities through two main approaches. The first of these is to examine the films from the perspective of feminist theory, and the second is to view the ways in which the films victimize women and present them as weak characters. These aspects are, of course, a result of the period and culture in which the films were produced. This study aims to demonstrate that Disney Classics are

simultaneously feminist and anti-feminist works, with the later aspect reflected in the victimization of the female characters.

2. The Female Voice

The concept of the female voice is the relative power or ability which women possess to allow them to express themselves and make themselves heard in specific contexts. The magnitude of the female voice depends on many factors such as culture, family situation or personal experience. The female voice can be either weak or strong and can be reflected in women's freedom to act, think and make their own decisions. An analysis of the female voice in Disney Classics will reveal the level of volition which female characters enjoy in these films but also reflect the state of the female voice in the culture and the period in which the films were produced.

2.1 The Female Voice in Disney Classics

The degree of the female voice in Disney Classics is dependent on three major factors: the nature of the female character, the actions of the character, and the temporal context in which the film was produced. The voice can be weak, firm, or neutral, and the level of strength in individual films can tell us whether the female characters are treated as equals with the male characters or as inferior. An analysis of the major films reveals that the strength of the female voice differs from one film to another. One particularly useful comparison is that drawn between *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Cinderella*. The character of Snow White is a helpless young woman who flees to the forest in a bid to escape her vindictive stepmother. Helpless and lost, she is given shelter by seven dwarves before eventually being rescued by a prince. Her range of action in the film is limited, and she spends the majority of her time cleaning, cooking, and reacting to events in an overly emotional manner. On the surface, the case of the titular main character in *Cinderella* might appear somewhat similar to that of *Snow White*. Cinderella is yet another helpless character who must be rescued from her unfortunate situation by a man. However, as we shall see, Cinderella has a far stronger voice than Snow White. One reason for this may be related to the fact that both the Disney production of *Snow White* and the folk tale on which is based are older than those of *Cinderella*.

2.2 The Agency of Female Characters in Disney Classics

The representations of the agency of the female characters in Disney Classics differ from one film to another. *Snow White* depicts the female characters as weak and dependent creatures that need a man to save them. Snow White herself is a delicate and immature princess who willingly becomes a servant for the seven male dwarves who offer her shelter. Later, poisoned by her stepmother, she is revived by a man's kiss. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* was the first full-length animated production by Disney, released in 1937, and there is a marked difference in the portrayal of the female character in this early work and that of the 1950 production of *Cinderella*. The female protagonist, Cinderella, clearly has a greater scope of agency than Snow White. For example, she defies the orders of her stepmother and stepsisters and attends the Prince's ball, and she also tries on the glass slipper against the wishes of her dominating stepmother. She is also shown using her intelligence to solve problems for herself, using the abilities of her animals to escape from a locked room. Nonetheless, despite these brave actions, she still views her marriage to the Prince as a means of transforming her life.

In the first half of the 20th century in which these two films were produced, the first wave of feminism was still establishing itself and had not been so widely accepted as it would become in the period of second and third wave feminism. The main characters in both films have no

agency over their own lives without the aid of the two Princes whose main role in the narratives is to save the heroines and free them from their ordeals. Therefore, in films like *Cinderella* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, women are depicted as weak individuals who are controlled by their society and surroundings. In the case of the 1959 film *Sleeping Beauty*, it is possible to categorize the agency of the female characters into three classes: healthy, neutral, and weak. At the very beginning of the film, three female fairies are shown saving a princess's life by taking her away and hiding her from a female antagonist. This scene shows the conflicted nature of the portrayal of female characters in this film, simultaneously reflecting female empowerment and female victimization. At the time at which *Sleeping Beauty* was made, second wave feminism was emerging and issues related to female empowerment were beginning to gain a foothold in society.

However, in the much later *The Little Mermaid*, the situation is quite different. The narrative in the 1989 film revolves around the female protagonist's rebellion against the authority that prevents her desired change. The mermaid Ariel rebels against her nature and her community's will by selling her magical voice to lose her tail and leave her sea kingdom home to visit the land. She commits this act of transgression because she has chosen a human to become her future husband. The female protagonist's actions are somewhat reminiscent of black feminism, as she enacts her own agency by choosing a husband of a different race. When the film was released, women around the world were beginning to gain awareness about their true selves. Women increasingly began to change what they did not like about their bodies through cosmetic procedures. That is parallel with the beginning of third-wave feminism, which emphasize the agency of individual women as individuals, helping women to gain more freedom and independence. Therefore, it can be said that Disney Classics are in a cycle with society's perspectives of women and also with the waves of feminism. These films both reflect the society and simultaneously either indirectly shape or predict the future of society itself.

"Over the years, not only has Disney stepped in and set the standards for feature-length fairy tale films in the world of cinema, but Disney Studios have been able to retain a market stranglehold on fairy tale films up to the present" (Ayob)

2.3 The Impact of The Female Voice

The impact of the female voice in the films and on the viewer depends on two factors. The first is the nature of the narrative; the second is the nature of the viewer. Viewers can learn a lesson from these films and resolve not be as voiceless as characters such as *Snow White*. The films can teach the readers not to follow the footsteps of these silenced characters, an ambition that is common in of today's ever-more enlightened world. Although people are more aware of the issues of gender equality and feminism, these films can also have an opposite effect and lead young children down another path. They can easily be influenced by these and imitate the weaker characters and may come to view women as inferior to men. Younger viewers might also think that females are weak and should always wait for males to save them from hardship. This is a critical issue because children are susceptible and can be easily influenced by the themes of these films.

"The Disney experience is a fractured one; the Disney fan is aware of the silent tension, which creates suspicion, paranoia, and mistrust."
(Shortsleeve)

3. The Typical Hero: Patriarchy

As with any traditional story or narrative, Disney Classics often display the theme of patriarchy and the domination of men over women. The magnitude of this theme changes from a story to another; in earlier films based on traditional fairy tales such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, it is very prominent, but in later films such as *The Little Mermaid*, patriarchy is less apparent, despite the fact that the 1989 film is also based on an older fairy tale. The male characters in Disney Classics share typical features and characteristics. They are all handsome and in flattering physical shape. Also, they all are all monogamous, falling for the princesses at first sight. They are brave fighters whose role is to be the saviors of the female protagonists.

3.1 Men as the Sole Savior and Decision Makers for Female Characters

The male characters in these stories are consistently portrayed as the sole saviors of the female protagonists, an aspect of the films that promotes and encourages patriarchy among the viewers of the films. The narratives also suggest that men are more powerful than women, a factor which further strengthens the magnitude of patriarchy. The origins of the fairy tales on which the films are based can be traced back to ancient times; they have been rewritten and adjusted according to the demands of the culture and society in which the films are produced. If the impact of patriarchy had not exerted an influence on the scriptwriters at the time in which the films were made, they would have changed many details of the narrative before commencing production. This can only be interpreted in one way: in the period in which many of these films were made, patriarchy was still dominant in society and feminism was not widely accepted. While the narratives of Disney stories generally present the idea that women are less powerful than men, the level of this idea changes from one film to the next. For example, in the case of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the female protagonist has no agency, and she can only be saved through a kiss from the Prince and his brave acts. Moreover, the objectification of women is another patriarchy related theme that is particularly apparent in this film. The male character only falls in love with Snow White because of her rank as a princess, her beauty, her voice and her overall appearance, a portrayal which reflects the rejection of the first wave of feminism. However, this is less apparent in the case of *Cinderella*. Cinderella herself takes action to free herself by running away from her cruel stepmother, and the Prince falls in love with her without being aware of her royal status. Indeed, he refuses to listen to his father when he asks him to marry another girl from a more prestigious family.

In *Sleeping Beauty*, we can see similar examples of female empowerment and woman to woman encouragement. Although the ending of the film is very similar to the earlier film, there is still evidence of female empowerment as it is three female fairies who rescue the female protagonist from The Mistress of All Evil. This reflects the second wave of feminism and how this concept was slowly gaining popularity despite its initial rejection. However, in the case of *The Little Mermaid*, things are very different. It is Ariel, the female protagonist, who saves the life of Prince Eric's life when his ship founders. She also rebels against her father's will and changes her reality into something that she wants. In this later Disney Classic, the woman is the savior of the man and uses her agency to bring her dream to reality. Over time, the balance of portrayals of female agency in Disney Classics eventually evens out (Michael).

3.2 Male Power in Disney Classics

The male heroes of Disney Classics are generally more empowered than the female protagonists. They always do the hard work and save the victims. However, this difference in empowerment does narrow in later films, a feature which reflects the development and growing acceptance of feminist ideals in society. The men in Disney Classics are prototypes of heroes and saviors without whom the female protagonists, typically princesses, are helpless. In *Snow*

White and the Seven Dwarfs, Prince Florian is a strong male aristocrat who runs miles to find his dead beloved and kiss her for one last time. As was mentioned in the story, his appearance is very royal and kingly. He even wears a cape, a symbol of royalty and power. However, the character of Prince Henry in *Cinderella* is less dramatic. His appearance resembles that of a high-ranking soldier rather than a king. This trend culminates in the portrayal of Prince Eric in *The Little Mermaid*, who is portrayed as an ordinary man.

"Media have the potential to serve as sources of information regarding couples and families for many children." (Tanner 356)

3.3 Disney Classics Without Men

These reflections may prompt the following controversial question: what would the ending of these Disney Classics be like without male heroes? There are several possible answers to such a question. Firstly, it may be suggested that the female characters would have ended up trapped forever in their unhappy situations, helplessly and hopelessly awaiting death to save them from the hellish life they are forced to endure without these heroes. Moreover, they would have no option but to follow the rules that the antagonists had imposed upon them. However, another answer to that question says that without these heroes, the real power of the female characters would have emerged. As an example of this, we might consider the modern Disney Classic of *Frozen*, in which Elsa, the female protagonist, needs no man to rescue her and she can overcome her struggles alone. *Frozen* also avoids the use of a love story element in which the male character saves the life of his female counterpart.

It is clear that the presence of men in these movies has affected the image of feminism and gender equality. It is possible to suggest that these films could have contributed to the popularization and spread of feminism earlier and supported gender equality. However, another question arises here: how would an early twentieth century audience have responded to these hidden messages? This is a big question that can likely only be answered through a deeper examination of the culture and mindsets of that era. For example, if Cinderella had been as powerful as Elsa, what would have happened? If Snow White had been as powerful and talented as the main character of the 2016 film *Moana*, what would the audience and readers have thought at that time? Would they have simply accepted this approach? Or would they have rejected it? These questions bear some consideration.

"Given its global reach, how the Walt Disney Company handles the role of race, gender, and sexuality in social structural inequality merits serious reflection according to a number of the articles in the volume. On the other hand, other authors argue that Disney productions can help." (Dundes)

4. Victimizing Female Characters

The victimization of female protagonists is a very prominent feature of Disney Classics, with many films depicting female characters as victims and sacrificing the female image.

4.1 Examples of the Victimization of Female Characters in Disney Classics

The female characters in Disney Classics from the first half of the 20th century are victimized in a dramatic manner. This can primarily be seen in the harsh and challenging responsibilities which they are given. Princesses like Cinderella and Snow White are forced to be servants in their father's palaces and houses, depicting these women in a fragile and subjugated position. Moreover, the female characters have no other abilities than their beauty

and physical appearances available to them. They are powerless to change anything in their lives without the help of male protagonists, an archetypal depiction of victimization.

The protagonist of *Sleeping Beauty* is also subject to victimization. Princess Aurora falls into a 100-year slumber and cannot be saved without a kiss of true love. There is, of course, no logical reason why such a fate would befall a woman, nor is there a justification for why it requires the intervention of a man to remove this curse. Similarly, it is unclear how a prince could fall in love with a sleeping girl. Even in the much later film *The Little Mermaid*, there is no reason why the otherwise headstrong Ariel would need the protection and guidance of Flounder, a diminutive male fish. These and many more examples show women in a victimized position, a depiction which must surely have had long-term effect on the audiences of these films (Lawson and Andrea).

4.2 The Victimization of Female Characters as a Commercial Necessity

On motivation for the depictions of the victimization of female characters in Disney Classics may be related to the commercial realities of the period in which the films were produced. The victimization of female characters reflected the general beliefs of society in this period. If the films had depicted women in a more forceful light, they might not have enjoyed the commercial success and wide audience as they had at that time. Similarly, the dominance of patriarchy and the subjugation of women in the given time and context was necessary in order for the films to gain general acceptance. Depictions of female characters which did not reflect contemporary values could have led to the commercial failure of these films.

"Viewers of Disney's classics, which are chiefly children, are deeply affected by the gender and ethnic stereotypes encompassed in the classics. As a result, these classics turn out to be teaching tool for children and a major means of shaping child culture." (Letaief 3)

4.3 The Effect of Contemporary Culture on Disney Classics

The main psychological reasons why these Disney films featured depictions of the victimization of women were the psychological perspectives of the individuals which created the psychology of the contemporary society and which is in turn reflected in these films. An excellent example to illustrate this reason is the possibility that people of the period would not accept the depiction of free and powerful women common in modern society and would therefore be unwilling to watch Disney films. Watching these films in 2021, we may find the character of Snow White to be helpless and stupid, a character to be made fun of; however, audiences of the 1950s would likely have a similar opinion of the characters of modern Disney films such as Moana and Elsa.

"In recognition of the fact that the one who controls the arts controls the message, this article is informed by bell hooks' methods of critique of racialized and sexualized representations in children's film." (Wormer and Juby 579)

Conclusion

Even the older Disney Classics such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Cinderella* remain popular today across many cultures. These movies differ in many respects but they typically share the same plot map and they all depict the same stereotypes. Disney classics all feature a beautiful and victimized girl who is later rescued from their sufferings by a high-ranking man. These films are all reflections of the mindset of the society in which they were produced. However, despite these similarities, we can see that the magnitude of these issues do change from one film to another, a transformation that reflects the developments of society and social psychology. These themes must be taken into consideration when examining these films.

The first developing theme is that of feminism or gender equality, while the second is that of patriarchy, with both of these themes becoming less pronounced in later Disney films. On this basis, it is possible to conclude that the treatment of gender issues in Disney Classics became more balanced in the progression from earlier works such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, to more modern films such as *The Little Mermaid*. Each of these films depicts and reflects a different stage of the progress and acceptance of feminism in society.

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