

## ***Aladdin*——The Live-Action Version: A Feminist Revolt Against Patriarchy**

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**Abstract.** The live-action version of "Aladdin" (2019) is based on the 92nd edition of Disney's animated film of the same name, giving the audience a great visual treat. As a work in the Disney series, the image of the princess in the live-action version of "Aladdin" is one of the major attractions of the film. Disney's portrayal of princesses is varied. From a feminist perspective, the early images of the princesses embodied the patriarchal and husbandly expectations of women, which is a kind of expectation for women. With the public's understanding, Disney's character and image of the princess have become more diverse. With the advancement and development of feminist thought, the princesses of this period got rid of the constraints of a patriarchal society to achieve more individual autonomy. Aladdin in the "Princess Jasmine" is the Disney company to change the image of a trend. Based on the text of the live-action film Aladdin, this paper uses deconstructionist theory as the main research method and feminism as the focus of inquiry to investigate the shortcomings of Disney's traditional dichotomous narrative in the modern viewing environment. The purpose of this paper is to explore the evolution of feminism over time and to summarize the development of feminism to date. It is concluded that the live-action version of Aladdin challenged the patriarchal status quo, deconstructed the male/female dichotomy in early princess films, and represented feminist values as a film that achieved mainstream success. The film showed how filmmakers struggled with stereotypical images of women in making the film and provided a strong role model for young women to understand that women should not be tied to the home but should find their own meaning. From a feminist perspective, the live-action version of "Aladdin" breaks the patriarchal mold of previous Disney princess films and provides audiences with a strong, self-reliant female figure.

**Keywords:** *Aladdin*, Feminism, Deconstruction, Binary Opposition.

### **1. Introduction**

With the development of the feminist movement, feminism is embodied in the working field and cultural products. As the seventh art, the film is a good medium for promoting feminism in cultural products. Being the dream-maker for all ages, Disney Pictures has shaped feminist characters as a powerful tool for empowering women. Therefore, the in-depth study of the image of women in Disney movies has positive significance for society in that it pays tribute to girl power, rejects the male gaze and promotes gender equality.

At the same time, many live-action films adapted from Disney's original animation works continue to emerge, reflecting Disney's pioneering in the field of live-action animation film creation. Compared to each other and the original works, such films reveal the basis and power of the knowledge systems constructed by women's experiences and positions that are interchangeable among different cultural contexts. The real-life adaptation of Aladdin is a prime example of a successful adaptation. In this film, the heroine Princess Jasmine is no longer confined to the traditional image of a princess. However, she is an inspirational figure of women who combine characteristics such as a spirit of adventure, bravery and kindness. Using Aladdin as a starting point to dig deeper into the feminism embedded in it, it is possible to look at the development of feminism in cinema in a pertinent way.

Research in film narrative is largely related to the temporal dimension of film and television, the shaping of film and television space, and the characteristic narrative forms of film and television works. Even when researchers address feminist perspectives, they only take a superficial analysis of the female characters in the films as an entry point, rarely examining female narratives in film in a metaphysically complete systemic discourse. A search of the literature reveals a lack of due attention to the live-action adaptation of Aladdin in current scholarly circles. At present, most studies on feminist narratives in cinema focus on live-action characters in three-dimensional films; feminist narratives in animated films and their philosophical connotations are neglected. The extant theories cannot cover the spectrum of post-modern feminism that deconstructs the unified subject. Women are no longer a unified body or one, and women's identities are in flux, so how can women seek self-identity? How can feminism break the binary equation of 'gender politics = national politics' or 'gender power = power of a few elites'? These are the questions that need to be answered.

This study will answer the above questions through a specific analysis of Aladdin. In the film, Princess Jasmine is not bound by archaic laws. However, she courageously pursues her true love and joins forces with the 'thief' Aladdin to defeat the usurper Jafar and eventually becomes king of the kingdom. The film is a true portrayal of modern women's lives as they grow up pursuing liberation and freedom, showing the process of contemporary women's transformation from dependence on men to independent and emerging women and affirming the psychological and spiritual growth of women. An in-depth study of the portrayal of women in Aladdin has positive implications for society, affirming female strengths and breaking the predominantly male perspective of the portrayal, resulting in a more balanced gender relationship.

Deconstructionism provides rich theoretical resources and effective methodological guidance for post-modern feminism and undoubtedly has obvious significance for feminism further to construct a theoretical system of women's equality, guide the practice of women's equality, and advance the feminist movement to a deeper level in the post-modern context [1]. Drawing on the powerful tool of deconstructionism, this study examines the modern inadequacies of Disney's traditional gender binary narratives, using the Disney film Aladdin as an example and feminism as the focus of inquiry. This study aims to explore the evolution of feminism over time to summarise the development of feminism to date.

The following line of research will develop the paper: firstly, it will discuss the narrative strategy of Disney's animated films, which presents the structural characteristics of a single-line narrative, a binary opposition, and then explain its hazards. Then, a textual reading of the film will be conducted, drawing on the two-step method of deconstruction by Derrida, a leading scholar of deconstructionism.

## **2. Binary opposition between men and women in Disney's animated films**

Structuralism relies on the construct of binary oppositions. The dichotomous mode of thinking sums things up hierarchically, where all these oppositions are not equal and where one side always takes precedence, and the other is seen as derivative, negative and exclusive of the former [2]. In traditional patriarchal societies, women are often framed within a patriarchal and hierarchical value system associated with negative traits. People use traditional ideas, values, attitudes and assumptions of masculinity as the standard, believing that what is traditionally called 'male' has a higher status and prestige than what is 'female'. Most of Disney's early animated films were based on classic fairy tales and then recreated to a certain extent, so the narrative strategy of Disney films was characterised by a single-line narrative and dichotomous structure [3].

In the early years of Disney's existence in the 1930s to 1960s, female figures were designed to be soft and beautiful, in line with patriarchal ideology. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Disney's first animated princess film, depicts a tender princess who, after being persecuted by a wicked queen, is saved by a prince and dwarfs and ends up living a happy life. At the beginning of the film, Snow White happily performs household chores and waits at the well for the arrival of Prince Charming, which defines the princess figure as a housewife whose social duties are mainly focused on caring for

her family and children. Later, when the Queen persecutes Snow White, she shows her weak character traits and does not resist but runs away, and when the Queen offers her a poisoned apple, she bites into it in innocence and defenselessness. This beautiful and innocent image is the standard expected of women in a patriarchal society, beautiful and stupidly ignorant. The next film, *Cinderella*, portrays women in much the same way as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs [4]. In the film, *Cinderella* is portrayed as a miserable 'nanny' bullied by her stepmother and two sisters. At the ball, she attracts the prince through her beauty and is eventually rescued from her miserable life by the prince and becomes his wife. In both films, the beautiful, persecuted princess does not rebel against the tragic reality but is ultimately rescued by a white prince, conveying the ideology that women need to be rescued by men rather than rebelling on their own.

In early Disney films of this type, men were portrayed as omnipotent, while women were defenseless against their fate and had to wait for male rescue. The underlying reason for this is not the real-life weakness of women but the product of the structuralist dichotomy between men and women. In the dichotomous narrative framework, the former implies superiority, dominance, and initiative, while the latter implies backwardness, subjugation, and passivity. "What prevails in Western civilization is masculinity, i.e., male dominance at the centre; women are subordinate to men in all cultural spheres: domestic, religious, political, economic, social, legal, artistic. [5]" In early Disney films, male domination imprisoned women firmly, and women were left as the weak, the rescued under male domination.

### **3. Deconstruction of traditional Disney films by the live-action film *Aladdin***

#### **3.1. Deconstructionism and *Aladdin***

Deconstructionism emerged as an exploration of design style in the 1980s, but its philosophical origins can be traced back to 1967. Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), a philosopher at the time, proposed the theory of "deconstructionism" based on a critique of structuralism in linguistics. The core of his theory is an aversion to structure itself, believing that symbols themselves already reflect reality and that the study of the individual is more important than the study of the structure as a whole. In deconstructionist theory, deconstruction is divided into two steps, the first is the reversal of the hierarchical model of opposites, i.e., giving the advantage to the devalued side of the dichotomous model. This feature is most directly reflected in the cession of inheritance to the woman at the film's end. However, her struggle in the plot to pursue this hierarchical inversion cannot be underestimated. At the film's beginning, it offers the audience a princess with political aspirations. However, due to the systemic dilemma, she has nowhere to pursue her ambitions. She is denied her physical freedom (confined to a tower) and her right to inherit the throne. Accordingly, the male characters are interested in the throne, such as the wizard Jafar's ambition. At the same time, on the level of marriage, Princess Jasmine was fingered by her father to marry into a commodity delivered by her father to her husband. However, this does not stop her from challenging the system and gaining freedom. Music is used throughout the film, and the main character sings to emphasize the film's theme. Derrida also points out that the second step of deconstructionism in dissolving the dichotomy is changing, replacing the principle of existence, introducing new concepts, and not allowing it to return to the original model. The prince-princess plot of the *Aladdin* movie is not satisfied with the sex-turned version of the Disney fairy tale, the reverse opposition of female superiority and male inferiority; instead, it creates a new form of love in which both parties support each other. On the road to freedom, men and women work together to provide new ideas for a harmonious relationship.

#### **3.2. Redefining the Image of the Princess**

In the kingdom of Agrabah, Jasmine is a princess. In the animation, Jasmine is a brave, strong and admirable woman. However, the producers added a new context for Jasmine in this live-action movie. Since childhood, Princess Jasmine has been reading many books and is a princess with a big heart and ambition. She has always wanted to inherit the mantle of her father, the Sultan, with their

knowledge to govern the country so that the people of the country can live better. However, the Sultan rejected Jasmine because there had never been a woman for a sultan. The Sultan's love for Jasmine was misplaced and turned into overprotection, and after Jasmine's mother died, the Sultan locked her up in the palace. Jasmine tried everything to get close to her people and met Aladdin in the city. As a princess, Jasmine is no longer a "vase" character but a character full of wisdom and compassion and a big heart. Her dream is to become a sultan, and although there is no precedent, she never gives up this dream because she is not willing to submit to her father's authority [6].

Although Jasmine fell in love with Aladdin, the country's laws required her to marry the prince and not to marry Aladdin. This is obviously out of line. The princess is a royal family member, so her marriage must still be conducted according to the royal rules. The Torah here symbolizes patriarchal and marital power, and the princess is just a vassal. Although Jasmine's true desire was to become a sultan, her father, the Sultan, planned one future after another for her that she did not like. His Royal Highness is represented by Anders, who in the movie is dressed in an anachronistic fur outfit that looks out of place in the hot weather and makes it seem as soon as he opens his mouth that the prince is not an intelligent man [7]. Even if Princess Jasmine marries him, it is only to marry a person known as a prince, and with her character, it is difficult to be happy in this marriage.

In the second half of the episode, Jafang gets the divine lamp and wants to take over the sultanship, so he orders Princess Jasmine to be imprisoned. In the nick of time, Princess Jasmine broke free of the guards' grip and poured out all the emotions in her heart. In the face of external pressure, she decided not to be silent, she broke free not only from the outside world but also from her own heart, and at this moment, she was truly free. Jasmine completes her change of heart and mind and decides to break the stereotypes to take control of her destiny [8]. After successfully defeating Jia Fang, the Sultan realized that Jasmine was strong enough to be protected by no man and passed the sultanship to Jasmine. On the other hand, Jasmine also changes from a princess to a real queen.

### **3.3. The return and fleshing out of the male protagonist's image**

In Disney princess movies, the male protagonist is often shaped hollower and more banal. A princess always falls in love at first sight with a prince, which is too simple and does not stand up to the scrutiny pattern. The live-action version of Aladdin is richer and more realistic than the animated movie "Aladdin". He is a thief who steals for a living, but he distributes food to wandering children and teaches them what they can and cannot steal, which shows his kindness and morality. After getting the god of lights, he pleaded with the god of lights to turn him into a prince. With the identity of a prince, he can rightfully approach Jasmine and is eligible to marry her. He takes Jasmine to the world on a flying carpet, so Aladdin is as inspired as Jasmine [9], does not want to bind Jasmine, and supports Jasmine as a sultan. However, he did not reveal that he was not a prince, which conflicted him. Under the great temptation of reality, he once lost himself and decided to conceal the truth to maintain his vanity. However, the goodness in his bones made him a little uneasy. After his identity is revealed by Jafang, Jasmine's disappointed attitude gives him a great touch. Aladdin realizes his mistake and helps Jasmine defeat Jafang with the Sultan, finally winning Jasmine's love.

In the film, the role of Aladdin does not reflect patriarchal and marital power like the male characters in previous princess films, nor is it a thin and empty narrative absence. As the plot continues to develop and improve, he not only makes us see the return of the male role in Disney princess films but also shows a balanced co-existence of male and female characters.

In fact, over the years, Disney's portrayal of the princesses has been changing, from "waiting for true love to come" at the beginning to the princesses now beginning to awaken to their true selves: "Who am I?" What is my dream? How can I do that? And for Disney, this move may be bolder. The same ending, where Jafar fails, the genies are freed, Aladdin gains figurative fullness, and Jasmine chooses her favorite and eventually becomes ruler of the kingdom of Agrabah, illustrates how this movie has been changing society's gender perceptions for the past twenty-seven years [10].

## 4. Conclusions

Film as a form of art inculcates ideology and cultural values to the public. Through the characteristics of the different characters, the public can also be influenced by the transformation of film roles. In traditional culture, the image of women is mostly attached to men, reflecting to a certain extent the social value of women. As analyzed in this article, there was a gender dichotomy in early Disney animated films, with women usually portrayed as weak and marginalized and men as powerful. With the development of feminism, women's status and self-awareness gradually increased, leading to the portrayal of women in Disney films becoming stronger and more diverse. From the early days of women waiting to be rescued by men, Disney princess films evolved into films where women became independent and escaped from adversity, tending to convey the idea of gender equality. The princesses no longer measure themselves against male standards and are no longer at the mercy of men in their marriages and dreams. One of the extraordinary things about the live-action version of Aladdin was that it challenged the patriarchal status quo, deconstructed the male/female dichotomy that existed in earlier princess films and represented feminist values as a mainstream success. The film is important because it shows how filmmakers struggled with poor portrayals of women in making their films and provide a strong role model for young girls to understand that women should not be tied down to their families but should find their own meaning. Looking at the live-action version of Aladdin from a feminist perspective, the film breaks the patriarchal mould of previous Disney princess films. It provides audiences with a strong, self-reliant female figure. The limited level of theory makes it difficult to analyze the nature of the issue in more depth and detail on a theoretical level, which needs further improvement.

## Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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