The Influence of Patriarchal Consciousness on Disney Princess Movies

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Abstract. Based on the background of the three great waves of feminism in the United States, this article examines the transformation of the image of the princess in Disney films, analyses the association between patriarchal consciousness and Disney princess films through the literature research method of studying Disney princess films literature, provides a basis for the general laws derived through the case study method of the specific analysis of specific films, and provides an interpretation of the plight of women under patriarchy, thus finding that in Disney The princess image in Disney films actually weakens the objective dilemmas experienced by women in reality, but instead creates new anxieties for the female community. This paper attempts to re-examine Disney princess films from a modern feminist perspective, helping the reader to divest herself of a perspective dominated by patriarchal consciousness and to become aware of issues that have not been generally recognized in the Disney princess series.

Keywords: Patriarchal ideology Disney Princess movies, Feminism, Female dilemma Gender discourse construction.

1. Introduction

Disney Princess movies refer to movies that feature princesses endorsed by Disney, of which there are currently 14, such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Sleeping Beauty, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Mulan and Frozen, among others. Among them, Frozen is an independent movie intellectual property. 1937 saw the release of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, which kicked off the Disney Princess film series. Since then, classic princess characters have appeared on the cinema screen one after another, influencing tens of thousands of women all over the world. As a giant media company, Disney's strong export of princess film culture has created a worldwide trend of 'princess dreams'. In a sense, the character traits of Disney princesses have become a model for female figures. These films were scattered throughout the three waves of feminism in the United States. As feminism continued to evolve, society's ideas about women's issues became further liberated, and the traditional Disney princess image could no longer meet the audience's demands. From the innocent and gentle Snow White to the intelligent and independent Belle and then to the brave and rebellious Merida, the character development of Disney princesses can reflect the evolving societal ideals regarding women throughout different eras.

Research has shown that from the first to the fourteenth installment of Disney Princess films, the characters have continuously evolved in line with the development of feminist movements. The first wave of feminism, which focused primarily on gaining fundamental rights for women, such as suffrage and civil rights, did not explore more social issues affecting women. Therefore, although the Disney films of this period often featured female protagonists due to the influence of feminist movements, these movies still portrayed women as subordinate and subsidiary 'things' that needed to be saved by men. The second wave of feminism broke out of traditional political concepts. It introduced the slogan 'the personal is political', broadening the scope of discussions to include issues such as sexuality, reproduction, marriage, family, and housework. During this period, female

characters in Disney Princess films began to break away from traditional patterns and demonstrated a certain degree of independent personality. The third wave of feminism, which continues to the present day, is characterized by distinct post-structuralist and post-colonialist theories. It aims to deconstruct the mainstream theories of the second wave of feminism and shift the focus toward issues that were overlooked or underestimated during that time. In this phase, Disney princesses became more focused on seeking their self-worth, while female solidarity and self-rescue themes also began to appear in movies. Throughout these waves of feminism, there has been a continuous resistance against patriarchal consciousness, a male-centric ideology that oppresses women as the second sex. The progress of feminist ideologies forced Disney to re-examine the characterizations of female leads in their films and reflect upon any residual patriarchal thinking.

Therefore, looking back on the evolution of the image of Disney princesses, it is undeniable that their characterizations have grown through multiple waves of feminism. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Disney still has many issues in shaping its princess characters. Audiences, bound by the inertia of patriarchal consciousness, are easily confused by the superficial changes made by Disney and subconsciously ignore underlying issues, thus gradually rationalizing these undiscovered problems throughout the spread of Disney's brand. Each era's princesses had their role dilemmas, which corresponded to the real-life difficulties faced by women. At the moment when women briefly rested from fighting for basic rights and had not yet entered the struggle for more independence and autonomy, the princesses' characterization was so fragile, helpless and gentle that marriage was the most tremendous success in their lives. However, after people accepted more progressive gender concepts through tireless feminist efforts, the princesses suddenly became fearless, strong-willed, invincible and capable of turning the tide of events. However, women face countless obstacles and need to pay thousands of times more effort to achieve the exaggerated achievements shown in the movies. After departing from early gender biases, Disney began to shape independent women but weakened the hardships and difficulties faced by women in reality [1]. Disney princess movies excessively emphasize heroines' subjective initiative, linking it directly to a happy ending. Such a portrayal conveys an implicit meaning that links the degree of female success to their level of self-awareness, advocating an overly idealized value system that does not conform to reality and instead brings more profound anxiety and pain to women still subject to structural oppression. Therefore, although the image of Disney princesses has continuously evolved with the progression of feminism, there are still significant errors and deviations in the characterization of women's roles that cannot be ignored.

Disney movies have enormous influence worldwide, and the values they advocate deeply affect the construction of gender discourse in real society, which to a certain extent, reshape society's gender perception of women. Therefore, although Disney princess movies show some progressiveness, their limitations cannot be ignored. The media's deviation in shaping female characters is likely to cause secondary oppression to women who are already struggling. Based on this, this paper takes Disney princess movies as the research object and explores the problem of the evolution of the Disney princess character image. This paper analyzes the impact of patriarchal consciousness on Disney princess movies in different periods through three specific parts and points out the misleading bias in the shaping of female images in Disney princess movies. With the aim of helping readers to re-examine this series of princess movies from the perspective of stripping away patriarchal consciousness, this paper provides a fresh angle for the study of the construction of female characters.

2. The first wave stage of feminism

Almost all class societies and their economic and cultural systems have been patriarchal throughout history. Moreover, as class societies have continued to develop in all aspects of politics, economics and law, the male-dominated patriarchal system has continued suppressing women, keeping them in a perpetual position of degradation and domination [2]. In a patriarchal society, women had no voice and were often accompanied by a sad fate. By the 1930s, the feminist movement

was launched in the United States, and after its inception, it was opposed and oppressed by many conservative forces, especially by the proponents of patriarchy. The effect of the feminist movement on changing the status of women at this time was arguably minimal, and women remained in a similar plight of low status and lack of voice, regardless of family conditions.

Under this patriarchal social norm, women are often expected to live without thought, accepting what life gives them based on men's absolute power [3]. Women are considered fit to be housewives in the home, doing 'unpaid work' that supports men's lives, such as cleaning the house and taking care of life. Women are taught how to serve men better and transition from 'lady' to 'wife and mother', unlike men, who are free to learn all kinds of knowledge.

In The Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Snow White is abused by her stepmother, who even decides to send her to be killed out of jealousy. Snow White is of high status, but she is utterly helpless against the common male hunter and escapes only thanks to the kindness of the male. The kind-hearted hunter spares Snow White and runs to the forest to ask the seven dwarfs to take her in. In the home of the seven dwarfs and Snow White, Snow White is not allowed to run around and is expected to do all the cleaning, washing and cooking chores. Under the influence of the patriarchy, Snow White is rightly unable to live independently but must depend on the seven dwarfs, who go out to work every day while Snow White plays the role of a housewife at home. In this film, Snow White is characterized as a soft, virtuous and gentle but nose-to-nose woman who even passively pins her dreams on a water well or the salvation of waiting for a prince's kiss. Her life is also nothing more than a journey from her father's wings to the shelter of the dwarfs to a happy marriage with the prince. Once in solitary situations, she is subject to the murder of her stepmother or even other hidden dangers. It could be argued that Snow White's ownership is a transition between different men. Under a male society, women's rights seem to be a luxury, women are not even supposed to have any desires, and there is a certain social prejudice against capable women.

In the 1938 Walt Disney Pictures Profile, for example, the recruitment system and hiring policies of the Disney Company were open to women for the first time, and women were allowed to be employed in the coloring department [4]. However, all other departments were still predominantly male. Even the coloring department was dominated by male animators, with female staff playing a supporting role, working only on the coloring. Is it that women are not capable of taking the lead at all? No, not at all. It is that in an age where patriarchy is a major influence in every aspect of society, women are ignored and are only expected to be the "housekeepers" in the home, and society, in general, does not see women's abilities, does not see women being treated unequally, and does not give women the opportunity to take the lead in any task other than cleaning the home.

There was also an article in Glamour magazine in 1941 entitled 'The Girl Who Works at Disney', which referred to the nature of the work and pay of female employees at Disney, where female employees within Disney were paid between $18 and $85 a week, while male employees at Disney were paid an average of $300 a week, thus showing the difference between male and female employees. This shows the difference between male and female employees. The significant wage disparity not only underscores the disparities in capability but also highlights the divergent social standings between men and women. Undoubtedly, there exists a prevalent societal perception of patriarchy in operation, wherein women, despite their competence and commendable performance, are relegated to an inferior position vis-à-vis men and may even face the disconcerting reality of being remunerated less than their lackadaisical male counterparts.

In general, the first feminist movement in the United States may have produced a spark of resistance from women. However, it was forced by the long-standing patriarchal consciousness to impose constraints and rules on social norms - women were invisible and unable to have a truly feminine rise.

3. The second wave stage of feminism

3.1. Overview of the second wave of feminism

First of all, under the influence of the first wave of feminism in the United States, more and more women have gained the right to vote and access to education. Secondly, many men entered the battlefield when World War II broke out. Women who originally only played a role in the family went out of the family, entered society, and acted as an important labor force. In addition, with the prosperity of the U.S. economy, women's expectations for life have increased rapidly, but women's wages are generally lower than those of men, which makes women increasingly hope to change the status quo and pay more attention to the equal rights of the two sexes. Finally, in the 1960s, the second wave of feminism began to rise in the United States.

French feminist Simon Beauvoir published her work The Second Sex in 1949, in which she put forward the view that "women are not born women, but they become women later", which promoted the development of the second wave of feminism [5]. In the book The Mystery of Women, published in 1963, the writer Betty Friedan exposed the oppression of women by the traditional concept of a good wife and a good mother and called on women to reshape themselves and rebuild their value. At the same time, many women demand real citizenship and gender equality and want to change the state of gender duality in society. Radical feminists also put forward the slogan Individual Is Politics [5]. These views have become important banners of the second wave of feminism in the United States.

Women's rights greatly improved during this period, and many female elites emerged. In politics, female leaders have also begun to emerge. However, obstacles from gender still exist, and women are still under society's gaze. Various labels such as Wife, Mother and Daughter are still imprinted on women, imprisoning many women from becoming independent. There is still a long way for women to go to achieve the ideal of equality between men and women.

3.2. The impact of the second wave of feminism on Disney princess movies

Patriarchal consciousness has significantly impacted the presentation and perception of Disney Princess movies from the beginning. These cinematic productions frequently perpetuate conventional gender roles and ideologies deeply ingrained within patriarchal norms. An illustrative instance is observed in numerous pre-1960s Disney movies, where princess characters often embody troubled young women needing rescue by a prince. This quintessential patriarchal notion clandestinely reinforces the belief that women are inherently feeble and reliant on men for salvation, exerting a profound and enduring influence across multiple generations. In addition, Disney Princess movies often portray women as objects of beauty and desire, and their value is associated with their appearance. This reinforces the idea that a woman's value mainly depends on her appearance, not her skills, abilities or achievements.

During this period, influenced by the second wave of feminism, Disney Princess Films created five new princess movies, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, Pocahontas and Mulan, which presented unprecedented new developments in the shaping of female characters.

First, the princesses realized the transformation from waiting for the redemption of others to self-exploration [6]. The little mermaid yearned for the world beyond the sea, finally abandoning her tail in exchange for her legs and landing on the land. Princess Belle used her intelligence to help the prince out of trouble and also saved herself. Mulan joined the army in place of her father, hid her name, and finally became a meritorious general with her wisdom and courage.

Secondly, the princesses have a more independent personality, and the female consciousness is gradually awakened. The princesses in this period were no longer just attached to the appendages of the princes. They all have their aspirations and pursuits. The little mermaid bravely left the sea, came to a strange world and explored the unknown land; Princess Belle loves reading and is the only girl in the village who has read many books; Princess Jasmine categorically refuses to make an arranged marriage and pursues freedom; Mulan dresses up as a man and kills enemies, not only defending her hometown but also realized one's ideals [7].

3.3. The bondage of patriarchal consciousness to Disney princess movies

Disney Princess movies were influenced by the second wave of feminism at that time, reflecting the advanced feminist color, in which the female image has undergone great changes. However, these changes have not subverted traditional female images' internal logic and values. Because although the princess tried to challenge the old patriarchal values, the old routine of the prince protecting the princess still exists, which also conforms to the inherent concept of men in many people's minds that men are still stronger than women in times of crisis, which is not conducive to the establishment of the independent image of princesses. The emphasis on heterosexual relationships in the film is also a manifestation of patriarchal thinking. The princess's ultimate goal is to find a prince and get married, reinforcing the view that a woman's ultimate destination is marriage. Disney Princess movies are still feminist works dominated by patriarchal consciousness and are not real feminist works. The feminist spirit they advocate is not what advanced feminists really pursue. The changes in the films can only be regarded as a serious attempt by Disney to adapt to the voice of the times and the reconstruction of the brand culture.

4. The Third Wave of Feminism

The Third Wave of Feminism, born in the 1980s, began as a critique of the Second Wave of Feminism by American feminists and was represented by the Feminine organization Feminism Movement League and the Third Wave, which Haywood and Derek advocated. Feminine organizations, such as the Feminism Movement League and the Third Wave, were the main focus of this movement, highlighting the differences in female oppression between classes and races. With the movement's launch, "Third Wave feminism emphasized that it was not just a theory, but more importantly a mass political movement aimed at changing the social injustices many women suffered in their everyday lives" [8]. It attempted to deconstruct, to a certain extent, the theories that emerged from the second wave of feminism, shifting the focus from the unilateral pursuit of gender equality to confront patriarchal consciousness to the differences between women it ignored or belittled.

In contrast, with the third wave of feminism as the backdrop, the social context in which the film's script was written has changed dramatically, and these changes are greatly reflected in The Walt Disney Company's 2013 princess film Frozen. Unlike previous phases of the film, such as The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast and Mulan, which simply advocated gender equality and equality between men and women, "this phase of Frozen focuses on portraying the role and growth of female characters in the plot of the story as well as the expression and emotions between women" [9]. Anna and Elsa, who are inseparable sisters, are forbidden to see each other by the king because of Elsa's ability to control ice and snow. In the end, Elsa and Anna redeem each other, and their true love also saves each other and the country. "This is the first time a Disney princess film has portrayed a villainous prince" and the first time that a female character with great power has not been portrayed as a complete villain [10]. Elsa, who is supposed to be a character with great destructive power, is given the ability to rule the country by Disney at the end of the film's story, and Anna, who is a gentle, generous and powerful female character, is given the perfect love that belongs to her by Disney at the end. It is clear here that Disney aims to move beyond the framework of the grand narratives of male and female distinctions created during previous feminist periods to a partial recognition of the many female differences that may exist in life, to confront the natural differences between women and men, and to affirm the rights and values that make women women women and the differences in choices between individual women.

In 2014, Sleepy Hollow was released, a story that is an adaptation of Sleeping Beauty. The film tells the story of Princess Aurora, whose father deceived the elf Marlene and cut off her wings for the throne, and of a former lover who, out of love and hatred, imposes a spell of eternal slumber on the newborn princess. Marlene brings in the prince, but her "true love's kiss" awakens the princess. In this story, Disney does not portray love but instead relegates it to the role of family, highlighting its importance as a major studio that, by creating such images, has shaped feminism through its discourse

and influence, building the world through cinema. Marlene realized that she should not bring her hatred of men to an innocent girl, that Princess Aurora is an individual who exists separately from her father, with her personality and values, and that she cannot simply be seen as an appendage of her father, as a tool to get back at him. Disney is using the story of Marlene and Princess Eloise's relationship to convey to audiences its current reflection on patriarchy and the status of women - that women are not born to fight against everything male but to live in unity with men once they recognize their independence - and it is also a rewriting and critique of the Disney Company's earlier princess films that were suppressed and confined by the patriarchy. Both men and women have to break free from their cultural entrenchment, and the two sexes are not dichotomous but are one in the same social role; as Beauvoir said: the emancipation of a woman is to separate her from her relationship with men. Even if the woman survives independently, she continues to serve the man; although the woman and the man recognize each other as subjects, one remains a spectator to the other. Men and women must acknowledge their natural differences to recognize their fusion firmly.

The Disney Company's third feminist film about princesses also requires reflection in its progressive sense. From a narrative point of view, its narrative of feminism disengagement is too macro and does not delve into the current development of patriarchal consciousness and feminism, far from the objective plight of women in real society. In Frozen, for example, the narrative of the escape from the king's control is incomplete and even somewhat deliberately panders to the mainstream consciousness, and the ending seems too idealistic.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the impact of patriarchal consciousness on Disney princess movies during different periods and points out the misleading deviations in shaping female images. Based on the research findings, it has been revealed that the portrayal of female characters in Disney movies during the first wave of feminism actually reflected the oppression of women's autonomy, rights consciousness, desires, and ambitions that stemmed from a male-dominated society with patriarchal consciousness, with "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" serving as a prime example. In the second wave of feminism, although the character image of Disney princesses gradually breaks away from the plot paradigm of waiting to be rescued by the prince and begins to become independent, the classic ending of the prince and princess living happily ever after still reinforces the stereotypical belief that a successful life and ultimate destination for women is marriage. From the third wave of feminism to the present, although Disney princess movies such as "Frozen" have been influenced by feminist ideas and consciously focus on more diverse emotional relationships and life values, their solutions are overly idealistic and extremely weaken the objective difficulties that women face in reality, thereby causing new anxieties among female audiences and leading to secondary oppression by media power.

The evolution of female characters in Disney princess films and their progressive qualities and limitations are intricately linked to the evolution of social and ideological trends throughout different eras. It can be seen that film and television, whether intentionally or unintentionally, serve as a conduit for disseminating specific ideologies, which reflect the fundamental social concepts and structures in reality. When media spreads ideologies originating from reality throughout society, the concepts and ideologies of real-world society will be indirectly reinforced and reshaped by the media. Therefore, this paper takes a feminist perspective to re-examine the Disney princess movie series. Through this approach, readers can break free from the patriarchal consciousness and uncover issues that have not been widely recognized. Additionally, this paper aims to correct the negative biases towards women and their living conditions perpetuated by Disney, resist the misleading deviations in the female portrayal in Disney princess movies, and prevent secondary reinforcement of these harmful concepts among audiences. However, this paper remains limited in examining the historical context of the Disney princess movie series and its dissemination effects. Further research is needed to conduct a more comprehensive and in-depth analysis based on the findings of this paper.

Authors Contribution

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

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