Gender stereotypes and Sexism in Disney movies: Analysing Disney Movies during Pandemic in the backdrop of Gender studies

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Abstract— **Film is a powerful medium that entertain not people of a particular age but also of all ages. Film not only entertains children but also influences them in moulding their characters. So the portrayal of gender in film has a great significance in the modern society. While considering movies, Disney movies have a special consideration as these movies target the youth and plant certain ideas and concepts about social culture into the vulnerable minds of children. The Walt Disney Company, commonly known as Disney Company is an American multinational entertainment and media conglomerate headquartered at the Walt Disney Studios complex in Burbank, California. Disney mixes innocence with the ultimate form of fantasy to capture an audience. In the attempt to stick to the norms and portray stereotypical female characters, Disney created Princesses. He presented as damsels in distress and inferior beings to men, Disney Princesses provide children an inaccurate portrayal of gender roles at a young age. Through Disney's social success and intriguing films, such as Snow White, Aladdin, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, and Tangled, Disney Princess movies portray stereotypical representation of gender roles through the denigration of the female image, targeting and ruining the perception of youth today. Disney Princess movies target children and are a transfigured fairytale story in which innocence and moral virtue are questioned. The present paper entitled as *Gender stereotypes and sexism in Disney movies: Analysing Disney movies in the backdrop of Gender studies* is an attempt to analyze the stereotypical representation of gender role portrayal between the men and women in Disney animated films.**

Index Terms: **Disney princess, stereotypical representation, gender role, innocence, moral virtue.**

INTRODUCTION

People were always living through a very busy schedule. A radical change happened during the time of Covid 19. Covid 19 pandemic is the most dreadful time that humans face recently. Due to the spread of covid, most of the nations' governments proclaimed lockdown. The whole world spent this drastic time in their home. Films can be considered as the most effective method used by them for spending the boring time. Among children, cartoons are the most popular entertainment means. The magic of cartoon films lie in bringing fantasy to life or in near life situations. In the modern era, cartoon films became a mainstream on TV, different generations of children have grown up by watching cartoon films. By watching such animated movies of princes and princesses, many girls get fantasized about being a beautiful princess and many boys have imagined themselves to be as brave fighters and kings.

While discussing about animation films, the importance of Walt Disney is beyond words. The Disney Company, he founded has become one of the world's largest entertainment conglomerates. The Walt Disney Company, commonly known as Disney, is a multinational corporation founded in the US in 1923. The company was started by brothers Walt and Roy O. Disney in October 1923. This began as an animation studio producing content for children and families. Although Disney companies produced all types of films including live-action feature films, animated feature films and documentary films, etc., this company is famous for animated movies.

Recently a new study conducted by University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work published in the Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal says that Disney animated movies can be helpful for parents in how they communicate with their children about tough issues Disney films during the pandemic situation. Through such films, they combine entertainment with life lessons about love, friendship, good versus evil, death and loss, and the importance

of family. According to this study, it's found that talkingabout these important issues together can strengthen a child's cognitive and behavioral development.

Researchers analyzedby focusing on 155 feature-length animated Disney films released between 1937 and 2020. Most of the early films discusses about the duties of men and women in a patriarchal society. Almost three-quarters (73%) of the films have shared a common message about loving yourself and others, andabout 27% is highly focused on morality and social values.

Based on examples generated from these movies, parents could hear potential questions kids may ask if they are distressed about a situation faced by child characters, Disney films can also teach children about unfair situations in society and acceptance of racial, ethnic, religious, cultural and other differences. (Cheung and Mary R. Lewis)

Traditional view of gender roles is that males and females having different gender role expectations. Males were attributed that they were wanting to explore, physically strong, assertive, unemotional, independent, athletic, engaging in intellectual activity, inspiring fear, brave, etc., and described as physically attractive (masculine), giving advice, and providing leadership. Females' gender role attributes include: concerned with physical appearance (primping e.g.), physically weak, submissive, showing emotion, affectionate, nurturing, sensitive, tentative, helpful, troublesome, fearful, ashamed, collapsing while crying, described as physically attractive (feminine), asking for or accepting advice or help, and victimized. This can be seen in Disney films such as *Snow White, Aladdin, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and Beauty and the Beast, Tangled*.

Children are not born thinking that girls like pink and boys like blue or that women need to be saved by strong men. Instead, these differences is creating by humans itself and adopt these ways of thinking during the upbringing, and Disney films have a special part to play in that. This gender discrimination is injecting in children's minds. Another common character trope portrayed in many Disney films is that a woman's personality is binary. The heroine, is portrayed as young/adolescent, who is frail, gentle, kind-hearted, beautiful, loved by all, extremely feminine, domestic and sensitive. On the other end, the negative character is depicted as a middle-aged woman portrayed to be vile, cunning, wicked, ill-hearted, unpleasant to look at and downright unlikeable. For example, Mother Gothel (*Rapunzel*), Ursula (*The Little Mermaid*) and the wicked Queen (*Snow White*)

While considering the film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Snow White is projected as being fair-skinned and that makes the most beautiful.The film was created in 1937. A perfect example of a stereotypical weak princess is portrayed through the character Snow White. The plot is based around a young girl who has been trapped by an evil jealous queen and had planned to kill her/ put her asleep. Snow White was taught from her childhood itself in order to be a "good girl". She must obey everyone. At last she ends up running away and living with seven dwarfs. "A woman is considered to be a homemaker, naïve, and lacking in common sense" (Harrison, 2012).

Snow White makes an agreement with the dwarfs; they will keep her safe if she does the cooking and cleaning for them. Through this character, a typical social stereotype about women is created that women are supposed to cook and do house works while men are supposed to go to work outside. Snow White is presented as a naturally beautiful i.e., she is very skinny, has unrealistic naturally red rose colored lips, skin white as snow, hair black as ebony and never looks bad. This is where the evil queen gets jealous of her in the story fits in. The evil queen thus becomes obsessive of her appearance in the mirror and very jealous by seeing beautiful Snow White. In a UMW blog, Ms. Andersen states, "The story gives women mixed messages saying not to obsess about looks but be beautiful, and portraying a woman as the heroine, but still saying disobedience of the women's roles will lead to punishment" (Andersen, 2009).

Snow White was punished for breaking the rule the dwarfs told her, not to let anyone in. She was punished by getting poisoned from red apple that the evil queen makes a trick on her into eating. When Snow White is under the sleeping spell inside the glass coffin, she is waiting for her true loves kiss which shows the stereotype women have in a relationship. She is doing nothing and just waiting for a man to come save her or help her. Through this incident it is showing that women must need a man to help them from any bad situations and that women can't help themselves. The story *Snow White and the*

Seven Dwarfs assumes the stereotypical roles of women dictated by society instead of creating a world of pure fantasy.

In the film *Aladdin,* women are shown in the perspective of sexual look. Jasmine and other women in *Aladdin*is perpetuated the stereotype that brown-skinned women are feisty, animalistic and sexual. In this film, a vast majority of the women were shown as wearing racy clothes and dancing seductively. Through these incidents, a dangerous message is delivered to young girls and boys who were watching this film. Here, the message that is delivered is that a woman's looks are her most important asset and that physical appearance is the only thing that a boy will look for in a girl.

The film *Sleeping Beauty* is released in 1959. This film is depictinga prince who falls in love with a woman solely based on her looks. The film covers broader themes of true love, importance of family, dreams and visions, feminism, animate the inanimate and human interaction at unfamiliar geographies. In this film, Aurora the female protagonist is presented physically weak, shy and dependent one. The other female characters are presented as evil step mothers and witches. Even, the fairies including Merry weather are weak enough that they failed to protect the princess. Here, the male protagonist i.e., the Prince is portrayed as a strong, decision makers and brave warriors and is a true depiction of masculinity and manly vigor.

In this film, the role of prince in awakening the princess from deep sleep by a True Kiss which also depicts that women are dependent of their men for their social affairs. The fairies failed to rescue the princess from touching the spinning wheel and lying faint for hundred years. This shows that women are naturally weak and incompetent enough to protect their own selves from the evil. They also failed to fulfill their responsibility of protecting the princess. However, the film offers a positive connotation of virtue and evil. The virtue has been presented through the beautiful character of Princess Aurora while the evil has been depicted through Maleficent who was portrayed as an ugly one who was a witch. This shows that beauty is the symbol of virtue and goodness (Aurora) and ugliness is the symbol of evil as depicted through the character of Maleficent.

In case of film *Cinderella*, the situation is almost similar to other films. The film was produced in 1950s.From the childhood onwards, girls have been fascinated with Disney's Cinderella. They have fantasize about being treated like princesses and have been overwhelmed with the ideas that this film projects. The story begins with a happy life of Ella with both parents. The death of her mother turns her life down. Upon the death of Cinderella's father, her Stepmother reveals a cruelty and jealous towards Cinderella's charms and beauty. Later she is forced into becoming a servant in her own household. When the prince planned to organize a ball and invited all women to the ball. With the help of Godmother, Cinderella also gets a chance to participate in the ball. The prince falls in love with Cinderella. The glass slipper, the only clue about Cinderella and with this, the King sets the Duke on a mission to have the slipper tried on every girl in the Kingdom, setting the Duke to task before the sun rises. At the end, they found Cinderella is that one.

In the film, Cinderella is depicted as a victim of her stepmothers' torture. Here, the prince sets out to marry the woman whose foot fits into a dainty and delicate glass heels. He can't even remember the personality or even the face of the woman with whom he danced all night with. Like other films, in this film also the protagonist was depicted as slim, beautiful one. On the other hand, the negative characters such as her stepmother and stepsisters are portrayed as ugly looking ones.

Another example of Walt Disney movie depicting gender stereotype is *Beauty and the Beast.* In the film *Beauty and the Beast*, the female protagonist, Belle, embodies one of Disney's foremost princesses. In this film, Belle's body presents the images of subservience, domestication, and inferiority which were reflected against the superiority of the powerful males. As a woman and a princess in a Disney film, Belle seems destined to fall into the role of object, and she does. Throughout the film, Belle remains at the mercy of the men in her life. The film's antagonist, Gaston is treated as her aggressive suitor. Maurice, is treated as her quirky, social pariah of a father whereas Beast is treated as her captor and destined true love. For Gaston, she is an object to be won. But for Maurice, she is a property, as any child belongs to a parent. For Beast, she is a prisoner, one in lieu of her father, and subjected to Beast's hypermasculinity and overbearing appearance.

Like other Disney films, this film is also an alleged happy, fairy-tale ending, the message instilled in young viewers is one in which women are inferior things—pawns in a man's world. As a result of the characters' actions, emblematic of gender stereotypes, Belle epitomizes the role of an abuse victim. Finally, Belle appears happy. At the end, she becomes a princess, and also changes Beast from his anthropomorphic form, and manumits an entire castle of magical household objects.

Belle's physical appearance is meant to be waiflike, naïve, and elegantly small and her large eyes, snow white complexion, and extremely petite waist are symbolized as the beauty of a woman to be a princess. This is the image of a perfect beauty in Disney's most of the films.

Tangled, can be comparatively treated as a progressive Disney movie that makes a small level of challenges in gender roles and stereotypes. Rapunzel is not treated as a typical Disney princess awaiting her prince to come save her and swipe her off her feet to live happily ever after. But Rapunzelalso shares similar attributes as Snow White like, being very skinny and having a white skin. Rapunzel as well runs away from an evil villain, her stepmother Gothel, who kidnapped her from her parents and kept her hostage in the tower all of her life.

Like most of other films, in the film *Tangled* also, the hero Flynn Rider needs to come for protecting Rapunzel from her evil mother. It was with the help of him, Rapunzel experienced the happiness of freedom for the first time. It was he who brought out for first from that tower. At the end, Flynn was the one behind her for finding her real parents and later they became the next king and queen and live the rest of their life happily.

The treatment of women were common in most of Disney animated movies. Such movies were creating a gender discrimination among children's minds. From childhood onwards, knowingly or unknowingly, parents are injecting the poison of gender stereotype in the minds of the mind of children. The further growth will begin when they entered to society.

During this pandemic time, most of the children were spend in their most valuable times in their homes. At this time, most of the parents used these types of Disney movies to make their children silent. So these movies, more than creating a positive influence, created a negative influence among children.

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