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To cite this article: Hijazi, R. (2022). Feminism in Animated Movies: Disney and Anime. *Al Raida*, 45(2) and 46(1), 21-30. DOI: 10.32380/alrj.v45i2.1893

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.32380/alrj.v44i2.1893>

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Article type: Report

Published online: 31st January 2022

Publisher: Arab Institute for Women

Publication support provided by: Escienta

Journal ISSN: 0259-9953

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Feminism Approach in Animated Movies: Disney and Anime

Rawan Hijazi

Abstract

This article analyzes how animated movies contribute to shaping the gender perceptions of their audiences. By exploring the roles and images of the main characters in Disney film productions and Anime, the article explains how these movies and series first contributed to reproducing normative gender stereotypes before challenging and redistributing traditional gender norms. Throughout the evolution of the character's gender roles in movies, generations of audiences have grown up with contradicting expectations of men and women. Therefore, this article first explores the hidden stereotypes, known as unconscious biases, in the most popular Disney movies and Anime. It then explains how the movie industry, over time, has embraced feminist thought, thus altering traditional gender roles in new movie productions.

Introduction

The kind and type of movies children are exposed to helps shape their character, behavior, and mentality. According to Linda Jones (2014), movies are a rich source of character strengthening, personality upbringing, and development, which are all foundational to a child's well-being as they grow up. Animated shows and movies are certainly a huge part of childhood: many children around the world watch animated movies for hours each day. These children unconsciously learn behaviors and morals that are transmitted through movie and television show characters and stories (Wijethilaka, 2020). Two of the most well-known genres of children's movies and shows, Anime and Disney films, are therefore important to study. Since Disney's inception in 1923, the company has expanded to reach a net worth of over \$110 billion (Jeffries, 2021). Similarly, Anime, a type of Japanese animation, has increased in popularity over the past decade.

In light of feminist efforts to challenge the hegemonic patriarchal order worldwide, it is important to show how animated movies often exhibit and perpetuate gender stereotypes and, relatedly, the ways that some companies have more recently tried to address this issue in their films (Radner and Stringer, 2011). According to Perea (2018), for example, there has been a compulsive gender coding of female characters in the television industry for many years, which is paired with discriminatory practices. This ideology was elaborated by the animated television industry which had resulted in gender stereotypes and gave young boys certain ideas about how masculinity must be portrayed (Perea, 2018). Further, Perea shows that there is a belief that young boys should not watch cartoon characters that are female (Perea, 2018). Today, unconscious bias and gender discrimination still occurs in both Disney and Anime shows and films. While previous studies have analyzed this gender bias in movies and television shows, fewer studies have examined the changes that have occurred in the film industry because of feminist movements and demands, such as the #MeToo movement. Therefore, this paper will review whether Disney and Anime films and television shows have tried to instill feminist values and gender equality.

Literature Review

It is crucial to acknowledge the impact that movies have on children. As such, it is important to monitor what younger generations are watching and what are they learning from it.

Disney

As witnessed, young girls would watch movies whereby the male character is the “savior” or hero. That ideology was enforced by numerous Disney movies, especially some of the earlier ones. In older Disney princess movies like *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella*, the princesses would passionately await their “knight in shining armor” to rescue them (Schiele et al., 2020). However, there was a change in the representation of women characters in Disney films and shows. Disney switched the dominant narrative: now, women and girls are the “choosers.” They control their paths (Schiele et al., 2020). We can witness these changes in movies like *Brave*,

Aladdin, and *Pocahontas*, where the woman rejects the man chosen for them and instead, chooses their own romantic partners. This not only highlights the issue of arranged marriages, but also shows that women do have a voice and a choice. Their lives are not ruled by patriarchal figures like fathers or husbands.

Moreover, after the rise of feminism, Disney now gives their heroines certain attributes that are considered “masculine” in order to break traditional gender roles (Schiele et al., 2020). This can be seen in movies like *Brave*, where Merida, the lead heroine, is a skilled archer and owns multiple weapons. Merida’s mother is the face of traditional gender roles, however, and is consequently infuriated by Merida’s non-princess-like behavior. Disney’s *Brave*, which was released in June 2012, was seen as the break from the princess pattern (Garabedian, 2014). In 2019, Disney offered a remake to its famous 1992 classic *Aladdin*. In this remake, Princess Jasmine is represented as a co-leading character rather than a supporting character, like she was portrayed in the original movie. The movie shows the audience the struggles Princess Jasmine faces due to traditional gender roles and the patriarchal influence dominating her life. Moreover, Jasmine rejects the norm that a woman cannot be the sultan of the kingdom and refuses the arranged marriages proposed by those around her. In other words, Jasmine refuses to be silenced.

According to Scott (2019), Disney did not stop with these changes. Disney also released a song entitled “Speechless” with the *Aladdin* remake that empowers women to speak up and to not be speechless or silenced by anyone (Schiele et al., 2020). According to Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper (2016), this remake was an outcome of the #MeToo movement¹ that held Disney accountable for the inequitable representation of women and girls in their movies (Smith et al., 2019). Following the rise of #MeToo, audiences started demanding and expecting gender equality and feminist portrayals of female characters in Disney videos (Maclaran et al., 2015).

¹ The #MeToo movement is a social movement that advocates for the survivors of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Its primary goal is to highlight the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault, and to hold perpetrators and society accountable for this violence.

The growing popularity of feminism in all fields has motivated Disney to shift its portrayal of women and girls in their products (Schiele et al., 2020). Disney has been trying to convey the message to women and girls that they must break from the limitations and expectations that the patriarchal order has constructed for them and attain self-actualization. This can be witnessed in the movie *Moana* where Moana, the young heroine, is the one who “saves the day” after successfully completing various challenges facing her. The main message in such a film is that when women are empowered, they can succeed. Seeing Moana’s success, children watching this movie might, in turn, challenge normative gender roles and expectations. For example, young male viewers might begin to see their partner as an equal, and not as a burden or a responsibility.

Another important example of this “feminist” switch in Disney films includes *Frozen*, where the female lead Elsa ends up saving her sister Anna. However, there is some skepticism concerning Disney’s “feminist” efforts. This portrayal of feminism can be seen as empowering, but it is also commercialized. The worldwide entertainment company is trying to use this new respect for feminism by commercializing it in order to gain more viewers. Given that Disney is a multi-billion-dollar entertainment company, it is important to question whether the company is following feminism only for money and reputation rather than significant beliefs. In other words, is this a form of commodified feminism? In order to stay in business, Disney had to reconstruct their ideologies whether they agreed with such a change or not.

Anime

Anime movies are a growing part of today’s film and television entertainment industry. According to numerous Anime fans writing on the famous Anime application called Anime Amino, gender inequality can be seen in different Anime movies and shows. According to Rogers (2015), Anime presents its female characters as weak and often helpless. Rogers shows how this is very similar to the “damsel in distress” narrative, where the damsel is meant to be weak and fragile even if the character is combat-oriented. These characters are continuously rescued after being captured or even defeated by the villain in the story. For example, Robin, from the movie *One Piece*, was saved

from the world government, and Rebecca, who was saved from Don Quixote. Moreover, female characters usually have minor roles in movie and television show plotlines (Rogers, 2015). An example is that of Morgiana in *Magi: The Labyrinth of Magic*, whereby her character was only created to support the male lead either as a distraction to the character, or to heal him (Rogers, 2015). Moreover, Rogers points out how in *Pokémon*, the female character is always changing, and is but a replaceable companion. In the famous Anime, Ash, who is the main lead, always switches between female companions while his one male companion Brock stayed constant until certain issues occurred, and he had to be replaced.

Furthermore, Deverell (2018) showcases the objectification and sexualization of women and girls in Anime. She mentions how Anime exaggerates women's sexual features, which are used to attract viewers. Moreover, she mentions that this sexualization is also witnessed in the armors and costumes that female action characters are dressed in. Female villains in Anime are also victims of gender norms and stereotypes. For example, female villains—no matter how powerful—are often shown as “weak” in the face of a man's kiss. Deverell shows how this sexualization is not only limited to women and girls, but men and boys as well. She gives the example of *Fairy Tail*, where the audience sees the male character, Gray, in the nude multiple times. Moreover, Deverell shows that Anime reinforces gender beauty standards for both male and female characters.

Although most Anime shows and movies pass the Bechdel Test—for films and shows to “pass” this test, there must be at least two women characters who discuss a topic other than a man or men—this does not mean that they are feminist, nor does it mean that this genre has improved women's representation in their films and shows. However, it is worth noting that the genre has made some progress toward shifting gender norms in Anime movies and films.

Growing Up with Disney and Anime: Personal Reflections

After personally witnessing the change in Disney movies throughout my childhood, starting with *The Little Mermaid*, who changed herself in order for a guy to accept her, and ending with *Brave*,

where the heroine is her own hero and acts in the way she is most comfortable in—it seems clear that the feminist movement has definitely had an impact on Disney. As a child, I made a connection with Cinderella, with the dream and fairy tale of finding a prince who would sweep me off my feet and save me. As I grew up, I learned more about feminism and connected it to what I had learned previously from society. Automatically, I knew I had to unlearn many behaviors and norms that I was accustomed to because of the patriarchal environment that I had grown up in. But as a child, I did not think that anything was wrong with the portrayals of women and girls in the movies I was watching.

When it comes to Anime, it is clear to see that the popularity it has is because of its exaggerated sexualization of both women and men. After watching the first twenty minutes of *One Piece*, an Anime television series, one can already see the objectification and sexualization of women in the show. The way that women are portrayed with excessive cleavage, heavy makeup, fair skin, and attractive features is distracting. This is the same for many male characters presented in Anime, which makes one question whether Anime's popularity is due to the plot and art it contains or the sexual appeal it uses. Moreover, the Anime industry portrays what could be classified as toxic femininity, whereby the expectations of the genders keep women subservient and submissive to the dominance of the male figure. This is evidenced by the excessive strengthening of the masculine personality embedded in Anime. For instance, in most Anime movies, the female character is often introduced with white or pink roses and some sort of bland music, marking the character as pure, innocent, and gentle. This image could have been done unconsciously by the industry, but it is part of the character's charm. For instance, when there is a curse word, the female character would cover her ears or white roses would fill the screen which emphasizes her chastity (Anvi, 2021).

Similarly, female characters, even if they are the lead, are still portrayed as gentle and as someone that heals a "broken" man or needs a man to protect and save her. In other words, she is portrayed as a damsel. One could see this as the Anime industry's move to disregard feminist critiques, or to

explicitly appeal to “anti-feminist” representations in their content and visuals to appeal to the audience. This could, however, also be unintentional as movie makers might not grasp the need to change the heteronormative and patriarchal gender roles and stereotypes in their characters and movies.

Recommendations

In order for the media industry to understand the importance of disrupting heteronormative gender roles and stereotypes, it seems crucial to have a set of regulations that correlate with feminist ideologies that children’s movies must abide by before their public release. Moreover, it would be critical to have a feminist film maker review and critique these movies before launching in order to confront unconscious biases or stereotypes that are embedded in movies. Further, movies should receive a certain mark of approval after introducing such changes.

It is important for the movie industry to understand their impact on youth. They should recognize the importance of this, and consequently the importance of their role in adolescent development. Children will take what they learn and introduce it into their day-to-day life as they mature. Disney has understood and accepted this role, even if it might only be for marketing purposes. Beyond gender changes, Disney has also tried to diversify its lead characters, and has included Black, African, Chinese, and red-haired princesses such as Tiana in *Princess and the Frog*, Mulan in *Mulan*, and Merida in *Brave* to try and make their films more inclusive. However, these changes are not obvious in Anime as the typical cliché stereotypes for both genders are still witnessed and exaggerated. However, one cannot deny the unconscious bias presented in both industries where, for instance, Disney still presented Tiana as someone who needs to make her father proud and settle for a modest living which falls hand in hand with stereotypical race-bound tropes. This is also seen in *Mulan*, where the narrative also suggests that this heroine, because of her race, does not revel in the same privileges of the white princesses in Disney movies (Dundes & Streiff, 2016). Although these movies attempt to be intersectional and inclusive, these main characters are still

weakened women characters that have to follow certain stereotypes in order to achieve their wants. Even if certain change is being executed, it is not enough to get rid of the unconscious bias still presented in animated industries.

Conclusion

Disney and Anime are two of the most popular media industries today. The underrepresentation and unconscious bias that is still present in both animation industries, however, shows that there is still a long way to go in order to achieve gender equality in the representations of women and girl characters in television and movies. Society is demanding feminist representation and the abandonment of patriarchal norms in these industries. Further studies are needed to show that even if feminism is represented, it might be for marketing purposes (commodity feminism) of the companies rather than a focus on social change. If Disney and Anime do not keep up with societal needs and demands, they will inevitably perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and norms among their adolescent, and even adult viewers.

Gender equality is vital for the development of society. Personally, children's movie makers, like Disney and Anime, must be one step ahead of society and must use gender equitable practices and representation in their work. Movies create the ideal and model world that people fantasize about, and this is the case for children. As such, let this utopian world be that of equality where men and women are not discriminated against and where feminism is represented rather than toxic patriarchal influences.

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