

A Study of Female Images in Tangled

Yuhong Tian^{1,a}, Yan Yang^{1,b,*}

¹*Faculty of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Kunming University of Science and Technology,
Kunming, China*

a. 1872793525@qq.com, b. 65916390@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Disney's classic animated film *Tangled* is based on an American fairy tale, telling the story of Rapunzel, a fragile girl imprisoned by a witch, who transforms into a brave new-era woman pursuing her own happiness. The protagonist, Rapunzel, relies on her own effort and wisdom, daring to break with conventions and free herself from bondage. The witch, Mother Gothel, is the villainous character in the film, who imprisons Rapunzel in a tower and exploits her magical powers for her own benefit. From the perspective of feminism, this thesis makes a detailed analysis of the female images in *Tangled*, interprets feminism while analyzing the images, and explores the significance of Disney Princess animated films in spreading feminism. *Tangled* reflects the oppression of women and the awakening of women's self-consciousness. Analyzing film and television works in the new era with the help of feminist theories can also help us further analyze women's thoughts in the new era through the shaping of female roles.

Keywords: Disney animated films, *Tangled*, female image

1. Introduction

Tangled is a 2010 animated film from Walt Disney Studios, the first film in the studio's comprehensive transition from hand-drawn animation to computer animation. It is based on the Grimm fairy tale Rapunzel. The film tells the story of Rapunzel, a girl who goes from captivity to her gradual awakening and realization of her self-worth. In the movie, Rapunzel is portrayed with feminist characteristics in her image. She has a clear understanding and firm pursuit of her own value and rights. In addition, there are other female characters, such as the villain, the witch, who uses Rapunzel's magic power by locking her in a tower so that she can remain beautiful.

This thesis analyzes the female images in *Tangled*. It interprets the feminism shown in the film while exploring the female portraits and discusses the significance of Disney princess animated films in spreading feminism. Analyzing film and television works in the new era with the help of feminist theories can also further investigate women's thoughts in the new generation through the shaping of female roles [1].

This thesis contains the following parts: In the beginning, it introduces the content of *Tangled*, carries on the literature review, and presents the innovation and significance of the thesis. The first chapter outlines the background, the development course and different schools of feminist theory. Next, it focuses on the shaping of female roles in movies, as well as the brave and persistent female

¹images and the female images influenced by male aesthetics. The third chapter explains the cultural connotation behind the female image in *Tangled*. Finally, it is the conclusion of the whole thesis, explaining the reflection and enlightenment of female image shaping in *Tangled*.

2. Theoretical Foundation

Feminism refers to the social theory and political movement founded and initiated in order to end sexism, sexual exploitation, sexual discrimination and sexual oppression, and promote the equality of sexual class [2].

This part mainly introduces the rise and development of feminism, as well as the main schools of feminism.

2.1. Rise and Development of Feminism

In today's western society, various feminist theories have been increasingly praised and recognized by Western women, and some female elites and feminists have gradually mastered certain discourse rights in economic, political, cultural and other fields. Foreign scholars on feminism research theory is more in-depth, of great influence, started earlier [3].

Li Yinhe [4] made a simple explanation to feminist theory: feminist theory is to achieve equality between men and women in all mankind. Feminist theory itself is a collection of theories of various feminist schools that have been constantly developing and changing in the process of feminist movement in which women pursue equality between men and women [5].

The development of feminist theory can be traced back to the British capitalist society at the end of the 18th century. Its emergence was a protest and resistance against the social sexism and the low status of women. As a social theory and political movement that cannot be ignored in the western society, feminism's birth was inextricably linked with the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution and other major changes in various fields. Since the second half of the 18th century, the feminist movement has experienced three major waves, from the first wave to pursue equal rights, the second wave to attack the patriarchal society, and the third wave to respect the differences between the sexes and women. In each wave, feminists fought for the realization of their own demands [6]. In this process, feminism itself has been greatly developed, but in fact, the three waves of feminism itself have been unable to break through the theoretical shackles and practical limitations.

With the continuous strengthening of the awakening of female consciousness, the theory of feminism is also developing and evolving. In the 20th century, the feminist movement promoted the continuous development and perfection of women's rights. Feminist theory is an important ideological system to criticize and reflect on the traditional gender concept and social structure. The development course of feminism is full of twists and turns and challenges, but it has made important contributions to promoting women's self-identity, fighting for rights and equal status, and changing social gender structure.

3. Analysis of Female Images in *Tangled*

The female characters in *Tangled* play an essential role in the movie, and their portrayal is very complex, covering gender, power, self-awareness, and many other factors. This part mainly analyzes the completely different female images of the witch and the princess in *Tangled*.

3.1. The Mean and Selfish Female Image - Mother Gothel

Evil and selfish, she is the biggest villain in the tragedy. In order to stay young, she repeatedly uses Rapunzel and locks her up in a tower. Later, because Eugene cuts Rapunzel's long hair, she grows old rapidly and falls down the tower. Only her clothes were on the ground. In the film, she is a despicable woman who only wants to imprison Rapunzel and use Rapunzel's magic to stay young. In the film, Mother Gothel learns that the golden flowers have been drunk by the queen, explores the palace at night, finds Rapunzel, sings a ballad to the sleeping princess, the princess's hair sends out dazzling gold, and Mother Gothel becomes young again, but at the same time, she finds that the magic of the cut hair will disappear and become brown hair, so she takes the baby girl and shuts herself up in the tower deep in the forest. She used various excuses to refuse her request. Rapunzel asks Mother Gothel to let her see the stars that float in the distance on her birthday every year, but Mother Gothel always refuses her request, saying that the world is full of bad people who want her power. Rapunzel develops a crush on Flynn. Mother Gothel, on her way to find Rapunzel, meets two of Flynn's betrayed associates and makes enticing offers for them to cooperate with her. When Flynn was away, the witch captured Rapunzel and told her that Flynn only wanted the crown and that his feelings for her were not genuine. The witch used this to sow discord between them. Let Rapunzel think Flynn betrayed her, take the crown and run. Then the witch took the heartbroken Rapunzel back to the tower. Flynn was arrested and convicted of stealing the crown jewels and sentenced to hang. It also shows that she is a selfish woman who will stop at nothing to achieve her own ends.

3.2. The Brave and Persistent Female Image - Rapunzel

The majority of comments regarding Princess Rapunzel are overwhelmingly positive, often commending her free-spirited, independent, and modern personality. This represents a significant departure from the traditional narrative in previous Disney stories, where princesses often await rescue by a prince. Confronted with danger, Rapunzel exhibits heroism, opting to fight rather than seek protection by hiding behind others. Rapunzel possesses a pure and lively personality, characterized by an insatiable curiosity about the unknown. She embodies a brave and self-reliant female archetype. She cherishes freedom and adventure, pursuing her dreams with courage.

In *Tangled*, Princess Rapunzel is liberated from the vase image of lettuce in the original story, showing a new image of women who subvert male subjects and speak for themselves. When the thief accidentally broke into the tower, she fought back with violence against the foreign intruder, bravely fought against the foreign threat and defended her dominant position. When she found out that the thief came from the unknown world outside the tower, she bound and restrained him with her long hair and asked him to act as a guide to show her the sky lantern she longed for. The image creation of Princess Rapunzel shows the determination of modern women to resist the traditional patriarchal society.

Rapunzel's personality changes a lot over the course of the film. She began to have her own purpose and grew in the process of achieving it. At the beginning of the film, she wants to be able to leave the walls and see the outside world. But when she met Flynn Side, she began to realize that what she was seeking was not just freedom and adventure, but self-identity and meaning. In her journey with Flynn Side, she learns the power of trust and love, which allows her to finally find her true sense of belonging.

4. Interpretation of Female Images in *Tangled* from the Perspective of Feminism

In *Tangled*, the female image of Rapunzel in the film is a growing female image. This part interprets the female image in *Tangled* with the combination of feminism.

4.1. Women as Victims of Male's Power

The witch is perceived as a female figure shaped by male aesthetics and patriarchal culture. Her oppression and control by male-dominated society, due to her appearance and autonomy, culminate in her vilification. This portrayal highlights feminism's concerns over female bodily autonomy and the unequal power distribution. Women ought to have sovereignty over their bodies and destinies, free from external constraints and ideologies. Her representation underscores feminism's focus on female bodily autonomy and power imbalances.

In the film, the witch is portrayed as an elderly woman, her features dimmed with age. However, she exploits Princess Rapunzel's magic to maintain her youth and appear younger than her actual age. This depiction reveals the impact of male-defined beauty standards on women, compelled by society to remain perpetually young and attractive.

The image of the witch reflects the unequal distribution of female power in the patriarchal culture. The witch's magical ability is strong, but she is not recognized and respected by the society. Instead, she was forced to hide her magic, forced to bear the stigma of being a witch. This image exposes the exclusion and discrimination of women by the patriarchal culture, and women cannot get equal recognition and reward even if they have the ability.

The witch is portrayed as a villain. Her character becomes distorted and becomes a hindrance to Rapunzel's freedom and happiness. Such shaping shows that women may take the wrong path and produce extreme thoughts and behaviors when they are oppressed and restricted by society. Such extreme thoughts and behaviors may also be a rebellion against social inequality, but this kind of rebellion is wrong and detrimental to the development of women and society. From another perspective, the image of the witch also shows something about women's self-perception and values. Mother Gothel is influenced by the male aesthetic and believes that she is only valuable if she is young and beautiful. This shows that women tend to doubt and deny their own value in the face of external evaluation and aesthetic concepts.

The image of the witch shows the problem of female body autonomy and unequal distribution of power. The casting of these characters not only makes the film richer and more interesting, but also makes the audience more aware of the various problems that women face in modern society.

4.2. Women's Resistance against Patriarchal Society

Rapunzel's story can be seen as a classic example of feminism. In the movie, Rapunzel is suppressed and monitored by disciplinary powers from the beginning, but later she gradually awakens and fights against the patriarchal system. It shows the power of women's self-liberation. The princess was imprisoned by the witch, trapped in the tower, and unable to move freely. The witch exercised strict physical restraint and control over her and regarded her as her own resource. This situation reflects a general pattern of oppression of women in patriarchal societies.

However, as the series progresses, Rapunzel begins to awaken and rebel against this restriction and repression. She asks Mother Gothel to take her to see the floating stars in the distance, but Mother Gothel always refuses her requests, saying that she cannot protect herself and implying that she needs protection and domination. When Rapunzel meets Flynn, she begins to fight for her freedom and rights. She makes a deal with Flynn to take her to see the skylights, and eventually, the two manage to leave the tower. This behavior reflects Rapunzel's self-liberation and resistance to the patriarchal system. It was also the beginning of Rapunzel's rebellion and awakening.

After escaping from the tower, Rapunzel gradually discovers that she has been deceived and oppressed and begins to rebel against restrictions and oppression. Instead of passively accepting her fate, she began to use her wits against her enemies. Rapunzel's awakening is fully reflected in the

film. Rapunzel's awakening and resistance as she grows up show us how women gain rights and liberty in society.

In the film, the witch and her accomplices set a trap to make Rapunzel think her companions have betrayed her, and the witch takes Rapunzel back to the tower with her heartbroken. When imprisoned again, Rapunzel finds evidence and realizes that she is the long-lost princess of the kingdom. She tells Mother Gothel that she remembers everything and discovers that the witch has been deceiving her, and she strongly opposes Mother Gothel's control and oppression.

In the tower, Rapunzel is strictly restricted and controlled by the witch, a situation that reflects the general pattern of oppression of women in patriarchal societies. Furthermore, in her struggle against the witches and soldiers, Rapunzel is also oppressed and determined by the patriarchal society. Although she exhibits exceptional wisdom and courage, she is still limited and controlled by men, thus preventing her from living the life she desires.

The story of Rapunzel underscores the significance of self-awareness and self-discovery among women. In the film, Rapunzel is initially confined and controlled within a tower by Mother Gothel, who vigilantly monitors her every move. Her ignorance of the outside world and the concealment of her true identity further compound her isolation. However, her encounter and subsequent interactions with Flynn catalyze her independent thinking and initiate her journey towards self-discovery. She ultimately discovers her true identity and unveils her concealed past. This narrative accentuates the imperative for women to assert autonomy over their destiny and delve into their authentic selves, as opposed to conforming to external constraints and expectations. Her transformation inspires other women to awaken and fight for their own rights and freedoms. This powerful message of feminist empowerment resonates with audiences of all ages, encouraging them to question and challenge patriarchal norms and behaviors.

4.3. Women's Recognition of Self-identity

The feminist elements in *Tangled* reflect the core values and ideas of contemporary feminism, and among them, the most important one is women's self-liberation and self-realization. This self-liberation and self-realization are embodied in the personality, autonomy, and courage of female characters.

Rapunzel is a princess who works hard to achieve her dreams and realizes them. Along the way, she receives help, but these are the help she has fought for herself, such as touching the hearts of the bandits, using her wit to get the male lead to guide her, and turning danger or obstacles into opportunities at critical moments. She has a high degree of autonomy and is one of the few Disney princesses who has strength in a society where women are generally believed to be not good at sports. In addition, the film breaks the stereotype that women are supposed to have long hair, as Rapunzel's long hair is cut off at the end. In daily behavior, Rapunzel behaves freely and does not conform to the stereotypical image of "gentle", "dignified" and "weak" imposed on women by the patriarchal society [7]. The fact that Rapunzel has become a role model for contemporary women is that she is the first Disney princess who truly takes action and realizes her dreams for herself, which is a breakthrough in feminism in the Disney Princess franchise [8].

In the movie, Rapunzel becomes braver and learns to use her hair to overcome difficulties through her battles with the witch and the pursuers, ultimately winning her freedom and happiness. This behavior reflects the idea that women can use their own power to fight against patriarchy.

The relationship between Rapunzel and Flynn exhibits a non-traditional gender dynamic, challenging traditional gender roles. Rapunzel does not build her existence and value on Flynn's body but instead takes control of the situation, demonstrating her ability and strength. This demonstration indicates that women can play a role and achieve independence in society through their own actions and power.

Rapunzel's story encourages women to struggle and fight for freedom. Her feminine power and courage inspire other women to slowly achieve self-liberation and break away from the traditional allocation of gender roles. Rapunzel's story also challenges the traditional portrayal of women in Disney movies, where female characters are often passive, waiting for a prince to rescue them and providing little agency.

5. Conclusion

From a feminist perspective, Rapunzel's character is a portrayal of a woman who undergoes oppression from a patriarchal society, resists it, and ultimately achieves independence and autonomy. The film reflects on the oppression and control of women by the male society through the image of the witch, emphasizing the problem of female body autonomy and unequal distribution of power. Rapunzel, the protagonist in the film, is a female image full of personality and independence. She not only has her own goals and dreams, but also realizes self-identification and growth through her own efforts and experiences.

The concepts of feminism and gender equality depicted in the film offer significant insights and reflections for contemporary society. Women ought to possess the autonomy to govern their bodies and destinies, free from oppression and control by a male-dominated society. Simultaneously, men must enhance their respect and understanding of women, while fulfilling their familial and societal obligations, to foster a more equitable and harmonious society. This perspective is widely acknowledged and advocated within the contemporary gender equality movement. Influenced by shifts in the social division of labor and the advancement of feminism, the portrayal of women is more realistic. The feminist elements in *Tangled* advocate for gender equality and women's rights, while also serving as a catalyst for social and cultural innovation. Female characters in the film transcend passive and dependent portrayals, embodying individuals with distinct consciousness, willpower, rights, and choices. This redefinition and reconstruction of female characters contribute to the eradication of gender discrimination and prejudice in traditional society, fostering social and cultural innovation.

In conclusion, the feminist consciousness conveyed in Disney's animated film *Tangled* reflects the development of feminist thought in Disney's animated works. From the perspective of feminism, by analyzing the female images in *Tangled*, this thesis has a more intuitive understanding of feminist thought, so as to promote the harmony and equality of both sexes, and thus boost the harmonious development of society.

References

- [1] Dundes, Lauren. "Disney's Modern Heroine Pocahontas: Revealing Age-old Gender Stereotypes and Role Discontinuity under a Faade of Liberation." *The Social Science Journal*. 2001 (3): 353-365.
- [2] de Beauvoir, S. (1998). *The Second Sex* (J. Xu, Trans.). Beijing: China Book Publishing House.
- [3] Kiyomi, Kutsuzawa. "Disney's Pocahontas: Reproduction of Gender, Orientalism, and the Strategic Construction of Racial Harmony in the Disney Empire." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*. 2004, 29(1): 43-54.
- [4] Li, Y. (2005). *Feminism*. Jinan: Shandong People's Publishing House.
- [5] Mao, Q. (2022). *A Study of Beauvoir's Novels from the Perspective of Feminist Narrative Theory* (Master's thesis). Heilongjiang University.
- [6] Offen, Karen. "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 1988, 14(1): 119-157.
- [7] Tian, Y. (2022). Viewing the Development of Disney Princess Movies from the Perspective of Feminist Trends—Three Periods of Development of Disney Princess Movies. *Journal of Jiamusi Vocational College*, 38(11), 73-75.
- [8] Zhang, S. (2019). Analysis of Stereotypes and Social Prejudices of Women in Animated Films—Taking the Evolution of Princess Image in Disney Movies as an Example. *Journalism Research Guide*, 10(15), 29-30+32.