A Study on the Changes of Princess Images in Disney Animated Films

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Abstract: There have been three feminist revolutions in history, and these movements have made great contributions to women's struggle for their own liberation and gender equality. From a feminist perspective, this article summarizes and analyzes the phased characteristics of the princess image in Disney animated films from 1937 to 2016, summarizing the development and evolution of the princess image in Disney films under the feminist wave in different periods, and finds that there is a certain connection between the two, which includes both the construction of social history and ideological order and the challenge to the social reality order. In general, the image of the princess seems to show obvious progressive characteristics, but there are different aspects and degrees of gender discrimination against the image of women in each stage. However, the different voices constructed by Disney in the film and the strategic adjustments made can still be regarded as a recognition of the power of feminism by the times and society.

Keywords: Disney, Animated Film, Princess Image, Feminism.

1. Introduction

In the early and middle stages of clan society, matriarchal clan relations were gradually replaced by patriarchy against the background of changes in the social division of labor, and this transformation lasted for thousands of years. In a patriarchal social environment, human gender cognition is often male-centered, and the definition of women's identity also exists relative to men, which makes women be regarded as lacking autonomy. Even today, in almost any country, women still do not enjoy equal status with men in law and are generally in a disadvantaged position. Although women's social status has improved somewhat, there is still a severe inequality compared with men. Even though society has begun to recognize women's rights at the theoretical level, due to long-standing and deep-rooted social customs, women's rights are still difficult to reflect in daily life truly.

Female characters in film and television works have a diachronic development trend. They change from landscapes irrelevant to the narrative to the main actors in the story. The camera shots change from objects being " gazette" to subjects trying to resist the "gaze". Their characters also change from flat symbols to three-dimensional "people".

Disney animation is often called "the illusion of life". It has always been at the center of the American animation industry, witnessing and promoting the development of American animated films from early development to maturity and then to the peak of global development. Looking at the evolution of Disney animation characters over the past century, each character embodies its unique

aesthetic characteristics. In the Disney animation works of the new century, the image of the heroine is entirely different from that of the female characters of the last century, showing a stronger sense of women. This change has enabled female characters to show more prominent personality traits and independence. In recent years, in Disney's animation works, the image status of the heroine has almost surpassed that of the male characters, becoming increasingly important and gradually replacing the male narrative perspective. For example, the female images in "Brave," "Frozen," "Zootopia," and "Moana" all have their independent voice and mainly determine their behavioral motivations by their own will.

Disney Princess animated films are a series of highly representative works with different female images. Analyzing their character creation will help the audience establish a more intuitive understanding, explain the profound meaning of these characters, and explore their social and practical significance. At the same time, it will also enable them in the new era to have a deeper understanding of gender and identity and make them pay more attention to their living environment, mental state, emotions, and even ideal pursuits. At the same time, it will bring some positive development experience to the creation of female images in Chinese animated films.

This study mainly uses methods such as literature analysis, case study, and comparative study, focusing on the image of female protagonists in Disney animations. By systematically organizing relevant literature and materials, it attempts to explore the patriarchal ideology, its causes, and manifestations contained in the female images shaped by Disney as the times evolve from a feminist perspective.

2. Literature Review

In the two books, *"Drawn to Life: 20 Golden Years of Disney Master Classes I"* and *"Drawn to Life: 20 Golden Years of Disney Master Classes II"*, author Walt Stanchfield sorted out the essence of Disney animation's 20-year golden age, analyzed the changes in Disney animation in these 20 years, interpreted the character's modeling, expression, and the picture construction of animation works, and proposed that the inspiration of Disney's animation works comes from life [1,2]. In *"The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation Modeling,"* authors Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston conducted a detailed analysis of Disney animation modeling, interpreted the character's personality and personality charm in the animation, and analyzed the image of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and other attractions through actual cases, interpreting the achievements of Disney animation and the characteristics of creative style.

In the article *Maleficent Reborn: Disney's Fairytale View of Gender Reaches Publicity*, author Justice Benjamin talks about how Disney's movies are gradually shaping the image of modern intelligent women who are strong, brave, work hard to face life, and do not question themselves. They have completely broken away from the traditional fairy tale world in which women depend entirely on men. They are more confident and more determined.

Cassandra Stover [3] studies the evolution of Disney heroines and the complex relationship between Disney's recent representation of women in the 1990s and post-feminist ideology. The author believes that although these new heroines seem to have more subjectivity (power) than their second-wave feminist predecessors, they also represent elements of the anti-feminist backlash agenda, which attempted to regulate and deprive women of their power through media and marketing in the late 1980s, prompting the public to be wary of anti-feminist backlash. Jane Batkin [4] proposed that "identity is an important issue in animation." She believes that characters represent the complexity of identity, self, and society, and animation allows us to realize ourselves in these characters, project our own desires and fears onto the characters, and realize the need for heroes and villains. Julie C. Garlen and Jennifer A. Sandlin [5] analyzed the construction history of Disney films from the perspective of "romantic rationality of love," arguing that this fantasy of relying on happiness reinforces the

supremacy of white people and the ideal of heterosexual, patriarchal families. This attachment even limits women's agency and hinders social progress.

In summary, through the elaboration of the qualitative research on Disney animation by domestic and foreign experts, it can be found that the research on Disney animation is more focused on modeling, narrative, audio-visual language, character image, and industrial culture. The research on the female image of Disney animation is more focused on specific works. It deconstructs the gender culture in the film from the perspective of personality and social opposition, and it often has a white-centric stance.

3. Analysis

3.1. The Influence of Feminism on Disney Animated Films

The term feminism originated in France and was first proposed by Aubrey Eugène. It is a generalized ideological system based on a female-centered perspective about social life and human experience. Feminism takes the situation and experience of women in society as the starting point of research and describes and critically evaluates the social world from a female perspective.

In the process of development, feminism has experienced three waves of feminism. The first wave of feminism began in the late 19th century and early 20th century. The French Revolution influenced women and began the liberation movement. During this period, women demanded equality in rights and achieved equality between men and women. The second wave of feminism began in the 1960s, emphasizing the differences between men and women and pointing out the uniqueness and superiority of women compared to men. Feminism in this period was called "new feminism" and produced many feminist schools. The third wave of feminism began in the 1980s. The scope of the feminist movement in this period gradually expanded to black people and women in the third world, emphasizing the use of personality differences or negative gender differences to eliminate patriarchal oppression and achieve "human liberation."

As a leader in animated films, Disney is highly representative. Disney princess animated films are the most popular films among audiences, like a history of the evolution of the female image. During its development, Disney Company interrupted the filming of princess films twice due to historical developments.

The first time this happened was in 1959. To highlight the status of men, most of the female images introduced were weak. However, in peacetime, this type of princess image is no longer popular among the public, and the box office performance of *Sleeping Beauty* confirmed this view. The theme of awakening through a prince's kiss was inconsistent with the demands of women seeking personal liberation at the time. After the death of Walt Disney, Disney's box office fell below the low point, and Disney Studios did not make any princess series movies for the next 30 years. The female group gradually emerged from the sinking ground, realizing the discipline of the female group by their cultural industry, and began to have a sense of self-reflection.

The second time was between 1960 and 1989, when large-scale women's movements and multiculturalism prevailed. The impact of multiple factors led to the failure to form a more systematic portrayal of female characters, and the Disney Princess series of animated films faced a second suspension. After 1989, the successive launch of *"Pocahontas"*, *"Moana"* and *"Frozen"* saved Disney from the vicious circle of the princess series and formed a more representative "Disney-style emerging princess". Once this type of image was launched, it quickly became famous worldwide. A very important reason is the shaping of the character image. The transformation of the character image is closely related to the era and cultural trend in which the creator lives. Modern society's attention to the power of women has broken the stereotyped female image in the traditional sense and transformed it into a fuller and more diverse new-era female image. In-depth research on the image of women in

Disney animated films has positive significance for society, affirming the advantages of women, facing up to the existence of women, breaking the image setting mainly from a male perspective, making the relationship between the sexes more balanced, and providing artistic contributions and directions for world animated films and feminist research.

3.2. The Evolution of Female Characters in Disney Animation

Female characters, as the most representative part, have created Disney's unique princess series of animated films, which is also known as the history of the changes in the female image, reflecting the requirements for women and the transformation of women's self in different periods.

3.2.1. Traditional Female Roles of Weakness and Beauty (1930s-1960s)

From 1937 to 1959, Disney animated films created three princess images, namely Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* respectively. Princesses at this stage are passive characters in a single love theme story. They are gentle and kind but persecuted by the outside world. Their royal or noble identities do not bring them shelter but make them work hard like servants. However, they are content with the status quo, blindly optimistic, and firmly believe that their dreams will come true. However, they have almost no other goals except finding true love, and the way to get love is just passive waiting. However, at the end of the story, they can all wait for the prince they fell in love with at first sight to save them and marry the prince.

At this time, men are portrayed as omnipotent, while women show no resistance to fate, and can only be blindly confident and passively waiting, which strengthens the status of men, weakens the functions of women, and presents the perfect image of princesses under the requirements of men. "Women as a gender group have sunk into the surface of history as a whole, in a state of collective unconsciousness." [6] Dai Jinhua believes that women in most commercial films have almost nothing to do with action. When danger approaches, men fight hard in the foreground. At the same time, women are mostly just beautiful and panicked faces in the background and are pre-assigned to a passive position as the object of male action and desire [7]. Indeed, although the three white princesses are teenagers, they are all designed to have hourglass figures, with plump breasts, hips, and slender waists. Although Disney's series of films are based on fairy tales or folk tales from different times and countries, and the costume design will refer to the regional style and the background of the era, the princesses' figures are primarily designed to be hourglass-shaped, and the costumes are also tight-fitting styles that highlight the outline. The princesses are actively observed by men, becoming objectified female bodies and objects of appreciation.

The first wave of feminism during this period had just ended, and the active women were considered to represent only middle-class white women in the United States, so the rights and interests of most civilian women and the entire social thought atmosphere did not change much. In addition, the first wave of feminism occurred from the early 20th century to the 1960s. The burden of the family did not decrease with the improvement of women's status, which made most women physically and mentally exhausted, leading to the emergence of the "women go home" phenomenon [8]. The image of Disney's princesses at this stage reflects American society's expectation of women returning to traditional roles and the maintenance of the heterosexual nuclear family system at that time. However, the stereotyped shaping with prejudice and discrimination is not only out of touch with the actual image of women who are pursuing women's liberation, full of vitality and diversity in reality, but also fails to reflect the real psychology and needs of women. It also contributes to the harmful ideology of femininity. Especially after entering the 1960s, the conflict between the public opinion orientation of "happy housewives" and the harsh reality of women's lives has become increasingly intensified,

and women feel depressed and even resentful [8]. This may be one of the reasons for the poor box office of "*Sleeping Beauty*" after the great success of the first two films, in addition to aesthetic fatigue.

3.2.2. The Awakening Female Characters of the Rebellious Spirit (1980s-1990s)

From 1989 to 1992, Disney released three animated films, "*The Little Mermaid*", "*Beauty and the Beast*" and "*Aladdin*". The overall image of Ariel, Belle, and Jasmine has improved to a certain extent, but the story's content with love as the only theme has continued. Feminism was at the end of the second wave, and the third wave had just begun. Feminist film theory had also emerged, which injected new vitality into the image of princesses in this period. Princesses were no longer all royal and aristocratic white women. Belle, a small-town girl with civilian status, and Jasmine, an Arab princess, appeared. The scope of activities also expanded to the public sphere in society. Women began to try to eliminate the status quo of weakness and dependence on men and gradually pursued independent personalities. In terms of female modeling, Disney also began to show an extroverted body posture, and facial expressions and shapes no longer blindly pursued red lips and white teeth. There were more edges and expressions, and each had a unique personality, and began to have a more natural and authentic expression. Women began to get rid of spiritual constraints and vassal status, from being saved to being savers, establishing their values, and having a solid, rebellious spirit.

The change in the princess's character during this period is related to the second wave of feminism because the discourse of "independent women" emerged during this wave. However, the second wave of feminism in the 1980s required women to return to traditional roles, believing that women's employment caused many family problems [9]. In addition, various forces opposing feminism were also active and had a significant impact, so the change in the princess's image at this time was more like a limited adjustment within the framework of the previous stage. The princesses' appearance still showed absolute feminine characteristics, and they became sexier while wearing more personal clothing. At this time, culture still used the female body as the material for writing its myths and myths [10], and the story still focused on the love between the hero and heroine. At the critical moment, the princess once again became the object of rescue, and finally ended with the hero and heroine getting married. Compared with the view that the image of women in the film is a projection of male values and a means of conveying fantasy, Molly Haskell, the author of "*From Reverence to Rape*", believes that these images are the product of unconscious impulses and taboos. The unconscious impulse attempts to restrict women to their original position, and the taboo comes from fear or awe of women's stronger survival power [10]. After the baptism of the two waves of feminism, women have not only gained rights and achievements in all aspects, but also demonstrated the speculative nature of theory and methodology and the vitality of action in the long struggle. The conservative male movement, which was diametrically opposed to the second wave of feminism, also intensified its attack on feminism in the 1980s, striving to regain the rights that women had already won in real life. Many rights that women thought they had won forever were attacked again [9].

3.2.3. Brave and Confident Emerging Female Characters (2000-present)

The images of princesses from 1995 to 2010 were more diverse. In addition to the white princess Rapunzel in Tangled, there were also Pocahontas, the daughter of an Indian chief in Pocahontas, Mulan from the folk tales of the Southern and Northern Dynasties in China, and Tiana, the African American princess in The Princess and the Frog. The third wave of feminism emerged in the 1980s. Influenced by postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism, feminist theory shifted from pursuing uniformity and attention to differences to pursuing diversity and tolerance of differences [8]. Because women have different classes, races, ages, abilities, etc., no one type of woman can represent all women [9]. The princesses of this period had diverse identities and facial features that were more

in line with their national characteristics. Disney also weakened the emphasis on the beauty of the princesses, intuitively reducing the compliments of others on the appearance of the princesses. Although there are still some male perspectives, overall, more attention is paid to shaping the princesses' unique body language, thereby highlighting the diversity of the princesses' personalities.

The princesses no longer always maintain a graceful posture and elegant movements but become stronger and more energetic in larger-scale movement designs. The princesses no longer regard love as the only goal of their lives. They refuse marriages designated by their parents and begin to take on the responsibility of defending their country or pursuing their career ideals. Corresponding to the gradually enriched themes, the conflicts in the stories are no longer the unwarranted oppression of the princesses by the outside world, and the conflicts between the princesses and the villains are no longer simply the opposition between good and evil. However, there is still a love line throughout these four films and a fixed pattern of heroes saving beauties at critical moments. At the end of the story, except for Pocahontas who chose her own tribe, the princesses finally ended up with love.

The images of these four princesses show obvious feminist ideas. Women begin to pursue their own dreams and values. Their thoughtfulness and independence, reflected by their wisdom and actions, become clear. But in the end, except for Pocahontas, the princesses all embraced tradition and returned to their original gender roles, but the form was slightly obscure, such as not directly showing a grand wedding, or hinting through others that the host and hostess are about to enter marriage. This is a shortcoming relative to progress. Disney still insists on changing the word "woman" to "wife" and "mother", ending the independent identity of women, and letting her find satisfaction in marriage and motherhood [7]. Dai Jinhua believes that the wonderful thing about the classic narrative of women is to end the story just right, and the possible marriage story is always left in the netherworld outside the narrative.

Between 2012 and 2016, Disney created four princesses with unique personalities, including Merida in *Brave*, Elsa and Anna in *Frozen*, and Moana in *Moana*. During this period, Disney tried to subvert the previous design of the princesses' appearance and physical condition, making the princesses stronger and possessing the skills previously given masculine qualities. Their personalities were shaped into three-dimensional and multifaceted characters, and they no longer had to strive for perfection as before. They could be independent and brave or impulsive and timid, showing their inner changes in the dynamic process. The three animated films all significantly downplayed the romantic elements, and the tradition that women's needs for care and relationships could be met in heterosexual relationships began to be broken [10]. Anna was given a love line, but the story focused more on the sisterhood and bond between her and her sister Elsa, and Merida and Moana's love lines were directly deleted. As current or future rulers, the princesses were given greater responsibilities and missions, and the stories also focused on showing the princesses' thinking and growth under the conflict between self-judgment and secular conventions.

In these three films, Disney did not impose so-called social norms on the princesses in any aspect and showed obvious feminist tendencies in appearance, personal goals, autonomy, wisdom and ability, action, and female friendship so that the princesses showed a kind of human characteristics that fit the reality. However, the works carefully constructed from a feminist perspective still did not get rid of specific gender discrimination patterns that dominated the social culture at that time and fell into an idealized description of women and their struggles. Merida resolved the possible war with a speech, breaking the past pattern of consolidating rule through marriage. Moana calmed the villain's emotions and completed her mission with her beautiful singing at the last moment.

4. Conclusion

The wave of feminism still affects our lives today. Under the impact of social culture in different periods, the difference in social concepts of men and women has led to a change in the cultural image

of women, creating a more diverse and three-dimensional group of women in modern times. As an important carrier of cultural communication, animated films have influenced the ideological development and spiritual entertainment of young people around the world.

Through the inductive analysis of the phased characteristics of the princess images in Disney animated films between 1937 and 2016, it can be seen that Disney's shaping of the princess image has a certain connection with the development of feminism, reflecting its construction of social history and ideological order as the times evolve.

The development of Disney animated films has witnessed the growth of feminism, changing female roles from simple to complex, giving women richer emotional changes, adapting to social changes, and promoting the socialization of girls' gender roles. Along with the feminist movement, animated films no longer pursue a single form of female image, but have more complex and diverse female images, no longer cater to mainstream aesthetic values, but fully enjoy the right to control their own bodies, allowing more audiences to see the reality of women's awakening consciousness, and thus pay more attention to the social status of the female group, which will have important educational significance for children and even society in the future.

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