

How Do Disney Movie and Their Remakes Reflect the Changes in Gender Roles and the Advances of Feminism?

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Abstract: This paper analyzed four classic Disney movies that embody feminism. People around the world all like to watch Disney movies. For example, Mulan and Cinderella. However, we did not discover those great movies' feminist ideas and gender concepts. In this paper, we aim to find the plots and core ideas that symbolize gender ideas and try to discover the concepts of feminism in these movies. We distributed our group members to different movies, worked on plot-analyzing and essential concepts, and then reflected on our paper. Furthermore, we wish to explore different details when comparing the same story filmed in different periods. Take Mulan 1998 and Mulan 2020, for instance; even though the professional filming team in Disney wanted to create a real "Mulan" in the movie, the difference in period would bring different comprehensions to the team.

Keywords: Feminism, Disney Movie, Mulan, Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent

1. Introduction

In 1937, The Walt Disney Company debuted its first Disney Princess film. In the early stages, Disney's female characters reinforced modest femininity and family loyalty ideals. One representative piece would be Sleeping Beauty, which illustrated the imagery of a voiceless beauty who relied on male figures for salvation and saw marriage as their "happily ever after." However, after the effort put into feminist activism around the 1970s, we as an audience can see a distinct transformation of the female figure in Disney films. That is when Disney started promoting non-traditional female figures that were all strong, independent, and motivated. Most "princesses" from the 1990s reflected developments by feminist activism, aiming to combine multicultural and feminist principles in their representations of heroines [1]. The animation of Mulan was released in 1994. Making Mulan was a challenging step for Disney filmmakers, both on the level of creating a new East Asian background story and a revolutionary feminist character. These two epochal films were reworked in recent decades, showing how feminist social movements have changed gender norms and assimilated them into movies. Massive changes were made to Sleeping Beauty. The protagonist was switched from Aurora to Maleficent, turning the story from a typical Disney romance to a conflicted revenge story

with an unmistakable feminist undertone [1]. Although Mulan was lucky enough to remain the movie's protagonist, her character became something more indicative of women's independence and muscular power. While the plot and Disney's mystical powers remain controversial, the new Mulan is more progressive in its feminism than the old one.

2. Mulan 1998

Mulan 1998 was released at the time when society experienced the awakening of the “third wave” feminist movement. Women's rights activists longed for a movement that would fight for gender equality and eliminate discrimination among women of different races, social backgrounds, and gender identities. The term “intersectionality” was established in 1989 by lawyer and theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw to explain how people's different identities overlap and thus influence how they are treated. In response to the different ways women are oppressed, this idea gave rise to “intersectional feminism.” [2] In response to the “third wave” feminist movement, Disney assimilated the story of Mulan, a woman born in the ancient times of a traditionally patriarchal country. Mulan was a watershed moment for Disney in terms of both gender and ethnic representation. Mulan deviated from the Disney princess stereotype not just because she is unrelated to any royal or noteworthy family but also because she is a valiant saviour rather than a damsel waiting for Prince Charming's deliverance [2]. The incorporation of both ethnic and gender aspects deemed the film rather occasional.

Despite her immense potential for independence, Mulan, like other Disney princesses of the 1990s, becomes reliant on masculine figures: her father and her comrades in the army [3]. Mulan depends on her fellow soldiers to assist her in defeating the Huns and becomes reliant on her father to affirm her status as an honourable daughter. Mulan rushes to the Imperial City in one of the scenes to spread awareness that the Huns are still alive and on the verge of invading the city, but no one listens to her. She is no longer treated with the same respect she did when she was a male soldier because she has removed her masculine disguise. Mulan understands she needs help from her army friends if she wants to defend her nation. Notably, the soldiers would only pay attention to her because of her military triumphs while posing as a man named Ping, including saving Shang's life and creating an avalanche to confine the Huns briefly. Mulan eventually can overcome the Huns, yet only with the assurance of the male figures around her.

As the battle ends with the Imperial army gaining victory, Mulan instantly returns to her conventional role as a dependent woman in the film's final scene. She returns home, dressed in a form-fitting feminine gown with her hair down. Mulan's appearance suggests femininity, implying that she is returning to a female gender display. She meets with her father in their home's courtyard and hands him the sword of the Hun leader and the emperor's crest [1]. While the story may have just ended with the heroine saving her country, Disney decides to add this scene in as if the glory brought by victory was not enough to highlight the nobility of Mulan's morale, that she still needs confirmation from her father to prove her as an honourable daughter. Mulan's father drops the items and hugs Mulan, illustrating his validation of her as an honourable daughter, and he says: “The greatest gift and honour has you for a daughter” [1]. Despite all of Mulan's achievements and bravery during the conflict, she ultimately goes home to carry out the traditional role that she was taught to play at the outset. This could have been a heartwarming scenario, but once again, Mulan's grandma interrupts it as she says to Mulan's mother, “Great she brings him a sword. She should have brought home a man” [1]. The comment from her grandma only confirms the perception that Mulan's success in saving the entire kingdom would not even be enough to overshadow the fact that she is single. Ironically, Shang, the male general, appears at Mulan's home for dinner as the play ends.

3. **Mulan 2020**

Even in 2020, a relatively open age, there are still stereotypes about women in *Mulan 2020*. For example, *Mulan* has a lively nature. However, her parents asked her to hide her nature and be a traditional woman to marry into a great family. This plot implies that in people's eyes, women must learn to do housework, wait for the old lady to arrange it, and then feed the next generation [4]. Of course, another way to think about it is that these episodes are included in the movie to preserve the integrity of the original plot.

In the pre-and mid-movie, we can also quickly get the message of gender inequality. Even though women are not allowed to join the military, *Mulan's* behaviour during the training camp reflects the plight of women in society. *Mulan*, in order to avoid revealing her identity as a woman, had to go for long periods without bathing (the army was all men, so the baths were used, i.e., together) and had to get up and dressed earlier than the men. This episode will reflect that in contemporary society, women need to pay more attention than men in the workplace. For instance, they cannot dress freely because after being harassed by male colleagues or superiors, society will blame women for dressing inappropriately to seduce men. Alternatively, at the drinking table, women need to control themselves from getting drunk because, in the extremely high probability of drunken-rape cases, women are tough to win. Moreover, most people in society think women are mainly responsible for being assaulted after drinking. As a result, women have always had a more challenging time getting ahead or surviving in the workplace than men.

Admittedly, there are some positive parts for women in the movie. For example, when *Mulan* uses her intelligence to defeat the enemy and save the army, regardless of her gender, we can see that she dares to help her fellow soldiers even though she may be punished (in fact, *Mulan* is asked to leave the army after this) It is not difficult to see the strength and determination of women. Moreover, at the end of the film, the emperor, the most influential and powerful figure at that time, not only does not blame *Mulan* for hiding her female identity but also praises her and presents her with a new sword as a tribute. Moreover, we can also see the affirmation and identification of women in society.

In *Mulan 2020*, we can find that it reduces the role of the red dragon and cricket as helpers, gives *Mulan* superpowers, makes *Mulan* more independent, and portrays *Mulan* as more successful on her own. At the same time, the role of the witch is added. Although the witch has a superpower, it still submits to the male, which seems difficult to understand, but this is precisely the image of the female trapped in the patriarchal society that the film wants to reflect. As the film progresses, we find *Mulan's* understanding of her womanhood and the witch's understanding of her womanhood after being inspired by *Mulan*.

4. **Sleeping Beauty 1959**

In the Disney movie production industry's universe, they produce countless incredible, high-quality movies. Going back to 1937, Disney produced their first film--*Snow White and the Seven dwarfs*. After the publication, viewers expressed different opinions toward it. Disney officially started their journey of making feminist films. In 1959, Disney made one of the greatest feminist movies--*Sleeping Beauty*. This movie portrays interactions between princess and prince, also demonstrating several gender norms in the contemporary period.

Throughout the movie, *Sleeping Beauty* develops around a concept of materializing women. More precisely, to objectify women. In the movie, the prince tries his best to save the princess, and finally, they get married. This process is just like a game; the princess is more like a prize in this game. The prince, who participated in this "game", finally got this "prize". He, as the contender, kissed the princess and woke her up. Even though they had no relations or interactions before, that could be the

factor that caused them to fall in love; they still went their way and lived their happy life. It symbolized the incentive mechanism and considered women as a reward and prize.

On the contrary, compared to contemporary life, if a doctor saved someone from the ICU, they would not marry them just like the prince and princess did. We must admit that fairy tales are always dramatic and ever-changing, but this development is slightly far-fetched. Therefore, the whole part of the plot was designed to reward the prince and materialise women.

The entire film portrays the process of rescuing the princess, but the theme of *Sleeping Beauty* also wants to show the bravery of the princess herself. For instance, she wanted to escape from Maleficent several times, but she could not make it. In the story setting, it seems like the princess has to wait for the prince to save her; that is the only way the movie ends. These two beliefs contradict each other, and there are some reasons. As the audience and researchers understand, the entire society was very paternal during the twentieth century. Women physically relied on men so that they could earn money for the family, protect the family as a whole... They mentally rely on males because they think males are more robust and responsible. The most important thing here is that people have already established a gender norm that females must stay at home and take care of their children, but men should work outside the family. In *《Sleeping Beauty》*, this belief is instilled in every character, demonstrating a sense of stereotype that women must rely on men. For example, the princess had to wait till the prince saved her, and the king did not give the maleficent enough power... Gender norms are fixed in those characters, and most observed these rules and showcased them in the movie.

5. Maleficent 2014

Maleficent, filmed in 2014, is a live-action version of 1959's *Sleeping Beauty*. What is different is that the protagonist switches from Aurora (the sleeping beauty) to Maleficent. Moreover, the story turned from a typical Disney romance to a conflicted revenge story with an unmistakable feminist undertone. There are revolutionary changes in the new version regarding how women are presented. However, there are still some patriarchal elements preserved.

First, *Maleficent* is a revolution for Disney films .it presented women's roles in many different dimensions, breaking the stereotypes of women's roles set by the patriarchal society. Maleficent is a hero, a villain, a ruler of an empire and a "mother" to Aurora (Aurora sees her as a fairy godmother. she is not, but she treats Aurora as her child). These roles show the audience that women are not only nurturers and caregivers but also have so much potential and are just as competent as men.

More importantly, the ending has changed. In the previous version, the sleeping beauty was rescued by prince Phillip who gave her a " true love kiss", which is a typical Disney cliché. As you can see, most Disney films end with a princess rescued by a prince's kiss, such as *Snow White*. This subconsciously gave young girls or whoever is watching this a message that women should wait for men to rescue them when they encounter danger. Moreover, It deified the concept of heterosexual romance that men would always put themselves in danger to save women, yet in reality, we are the only ones we can rely on when danger comes.

In the new live-action version of " *Maleficent*", the previous ending has changed to Aurora rescued by Maleficent's kiss on her forehead. So instead of a romance, the kiss came from Maleficent's motherly love for Aurora. The same ending was found in *Frozen*, princess Anna also needed to get a "true love kiss" to unfreeze herself, and the kiss came from Elsa(her sister) instead of prince Hans who eventually betrayed her. This kind of scene is a breakthrough for Disney movies. The contrast between scenes of men's betrayal and women rescuing women breaks girls' sweet illusions of men and romance. It implies a positive message: "girls help girls". Moreover, it shows us that our family members, our sisters, and our mothers are the ones who will never betray us, and we can always trust.

Although women's depiction in the film has improved, there are still some very patriarchal elements. Young Maleficent fall in love with a young orphan named Stefan. However, when they hit

adulthood, the human king offers his throne to whoever eliminates his rival—Maleficent. Stefan reunites with Maleficent, seduces her, drugs her and cuts off her wings while asleep. The fact that Stefan took Maleficent's wing to the king as proof that he killed her shows that patriarchal culture fuses women's sense of self-worth with their bodies. Moreover, how Stefan drugs her and cuts off her wings is a metaphor for sexual assault when a woman is passed out because, in reality, men tend to make women unconscious before they take advantage of them or abuse them. Therefore, Maleficent was re-imagined as a rape/sexual assault survivor.

In summary, we can clearly distinguish between *Sleeping Beauty* and Maleficent. This ever-changing society always provides people with new insights, and gender norms have been taken more seriously. We can see the brave princess, characterizing the woman's power, uses her ability to escape from Maleficent without the prince's help. The feminist ideas and women's strength have been fully demonstrated in such plots.

6. Conclusion

This article attempts to compare the new and old versions of the two films (*Mulan* and *Sleeping Beauty*) and study the changes in gender roles and the progress of feminism reflected in the films according to the development of The Times. At the same time, it shows that the remakes have made significant strides in addressing gender issues, especially those introduced by the old Disney cartoons. Even if there are still some issues with Disney's stereotyping of women to protect the original plot, Disney movies can hopefully address these lingering issues in a better way in the future. In a word, we know that Disney culture is constantly progressing, and feminism in the society reflected in the film is also constantly developing.

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