

The Changes Of Male And Female Images In Disney Princess Movies

Mei Qin

Film studies, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, Shandong, 250358, China

ABSTRACT

Over more than 80 years, from the First Wave of women to post-feminism, from following male-dominated social rules to downplaying gender bias to create independent and powerful women, Disney princess films have adapted to the evolution of gender rights in society and created a series of memorable princess images. With the gradual awakening of feminist consciousness and the rise of women's voice, Under the influence of three waves of feminism and the complex and ever-changing background of The Times, the princess images in the Disney Princess series of animated films have undergone three huge transformations, the image of princesses has become increasingly independent and powerful, while the male "savior" identity has been gradually challenged. Therefore, against the backdrop of social gender rights movements such as the feminist movement and the male conservative movement, this paper studies the changes in the male and female images in Disney princess movies in three stages, and explores the process by which princesses break through the male-centered social concept to achieve their own independence and strength.

KEYWORDS

Princess image; Male gaze; Feminist consciousness

1 Introduction

Princess films are an integral part of Disney, from the original Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs to Wishing Star in 2023, Disney has released a total of 15 princess films and created a series of memorable princess characters that have become iconic figures of Disney. Disney princess-themed animated films, as a type of animation that has accompanied the growth and expansion of the Disney Company, reflect the culture and temperament of the Disney Company behind the Settings of their princesses and other characters^[1], While bringing economic benefits and brand influence to Disney, the evolution of the male and female characters in princess films reflects the changes in gender rights in social thought. The development of Disney princess films is in the midst of the transformation of gender rights in society. The growing feminist movement is gradually challenging the male-centered social concept, and men are either compromising or opposing it. It is in the game of gender rights between men and women that Disney princess films gradually adapt to the social trend and constantly subvert the existing shaping model. There has been a variety of changes in the construction of male and female images.

2 The early budding of female consciousness and the dominance of male chauvinism

In the interwoven field of popular culture and gender consciousness, Disney princess movies have always been an important sample for observing the evolution of social gender concepts. From the 1930s to the 1950s, during the active period of the first feminist wave, this movement centered on striving for equal political rights, although it shook the pattern of gender inequality to a certain extent, still failed to completely break the deeply rooted patriarchal order. The early Disney princess films such as "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", "Cinderella" and "Sleeping Beauty" that emerged in this social context inevitably bear the marks of The Times. In terms of the shaping of female images and narrative logic, the film not only shows a deep dependence on patriarchal discourse but also conceals the faint sprouts of female consciousness. Analyzing the gender construction in the films of this period can not only reveal the profound influence of patriarchal culture on the mass media, but also help understand the predicaments and struggles faced in the early stage of the awakening of female consciousness.

2.1 The awareness of women's rights has just emerged

From 1937 to 1959, Disney produced three princess films, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, during the first wave of women. Feminists advocated for equal rights with men in politics, but the notion of equality based on men's rights ignored the essential differences between men and women. Ignoring the inequality of women in the family and the public domain, the movement achieved a phased victory, but in fact it was a weak compromise of a male-dominated society to women, who remained far from the center of power. Disney's works during this period, with real princesses as the protagonists and large parts of the stories depicting women's experiences, still

follow the male-dominated social rules in their creative concepts. The films of this stage are mostly love stories, and the male characters in the films often play the role of handsome and dashing saviors, who are upright and brave and can save the princess from her predicament. The princesses in distress are always passively dependent on the kind men and dream of being saved by the prince and getting love, which further promotes the development of gender bias.

In the Disney princess films of this period, the narrative framework was firmly constructed around the male-dominated value system. In "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", Snow White fell into a deep sleep after eating a poisoned apple, and only the prince's kiss could wake her up. In "Cinderella", Cinderella needs the magic of the fairy godmother and crystal shoes, and she also has to rely on the prince's pursuit to get rid of the oppression of her stepmother. In "Sleeping Beauty", Princess Aurora fell into a century-long slumber after her finger was pierced by a spindle. Similarly, the prince overcame all obstacles and broke the curse with a passionate kiss. These stories portray women as vulnerable and passive objects, place the hope of solving predicaments on male power, and even package love as the ultimate destination of women's lives.

2.2 Expression of male gaze

Under this male-centered gender bias, the film unfolds under a male gaze. First of all, the princess in the film is the object being watched, as French philosopher Baudrillard wrote in his book "The Consumer Society" : In the entire set of equipment for consumption, there is one thing that is more beautiful, more precious, more brilliant than anything else—and that is the body. Under the active viewing of men, the three princesses at this stage are all young and beautiful white figures. They have fair skin, slender figures, curved-like lines, and tight-fitting dresses that highlight their figures, and their external image is in line with men's aesthetic standards. Secondly, the setting of the inner qualities of the characters also largely follows the unidirectional gaze of men. In the traditional perception, being thin represents not only the aesthetic taste of the visual, but also the habit of being diligent and self-disciplined, while being fair represents not only the dignity of the race, but also the metaphor of women being family-oriented and rarely going out. These images are in line with the traditional requirements of men for women to be virtuous and family-oriented. The male characters in the film are often brave and upright positive characters, the saviors of the princesses, who are often beautiful, hardworking, simple and kind, and protected by men. If women break away from this stereotype of being obedient and docile under the one-way scrutiny of men, they will be portrayed as evil and vicious villains, which implies that obedient female characters will be protected and saved by men. Otherwise, they will be resisted and suppressed. In the film "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", Snow White is killed for her beauty. After being rescued by a hunter, she stays in the house of the Seven dwarfs. She is diligent and docile, cooks and cleans the house for the Seven dwarfs, dreams of marrying a prince and moving into a castle, and is poisoned and falls into a coma because she doesn't listen to the Seven dwarfs and believes the words of strangers. In the end, she was saved by the prince and found love, and the character of Snow White was created under the male gaze. The male characters in the film include the prince who saves the princess, the hunter who rescues her, and the dwarf who takes her in. They are all upright and kind heroic figures. In the dialogue between the stepmother and the magic mirror in the film, "the magic mirror" is a male voice and the metaphor that best represents the male gaze in the film. The stepmother repeatedly asks her "who is the most beautiful woman in the world", which is to seek the male aesthetic orientation as the other, and the magic mirror's description of Snow White's elegant appearance is in line with the male demand for the external beauty of women. It is this aesthetic pursuit that serves as the standard for beauty, and the stepmother initiates her evil revenge.

3 The abandonment of the princess's single image and the rise of the conservative male movement

In the long river of culture and art, film and television works have always been the mirror image of the ideological trends of The Times and the carrier of social concepts. The Disney princess series of films is a highly representative cultural symbol among them. Since their birth, these films have not only carried the childhood fantasies of countless viewers, but also quietly reflected the changes in gender concepts and power structures in different historical periods through delicate narratives and vivid character portrayments. From the classic narrative of early princesses waiting for the prince's redemption to the awakening path of contemporary female characters breaking free from constraints and pursuing self-worth, the evolution history of Disney princess films is essentially a condensed history of the development of gender consciousness. During this process, the 1980s and 1990s became a crucial turning point that bridged the past and the future. At that time, Western society was in a period of intense turbulence in the feminist wave. The aftershocks of the Second feminist movement had not yet subsided, but the spark of the third feminist movement had already been ignited. This ideological revolution that has swept across all fields of society has profoundly influenced the creative logic of popular culture, and Disney princess movies have inevitably been drawn into it. Under the intense collision between the conservative male chauvinist movement and the feminist ideology, the character shaping and value expression in the film

present a complex and subtle tension - there are both attempts to break through the traditional gender order and lingering deep-rooted social expectations. An analysis of the creative characteristics of this transitional period not only reveals Disney's acute capture of the pulse of The Times, but also enables us to gain insights into the arduous evolution of social gender concepts amid contradictions and compromises.

3.1 The development of women's image during the transitional period

In the 1980s and 1990s, Disney princess films entered a transitional period, with some changes in the portrayal of male and female characters in the films. It was a time of interweaving the end of the second and the beginning of the third wave of feminism, and feminist film theory was developing rapidly and becoming a trend, which added vitality to the creation of the "princess" image. In the development of the feminist wave, although the conservative male movement has restricted the rights of some women due to its collision with the feminist wave, the sense of gender bias is gradually being weakened and the "savior" identity of men in early Disney princess films is gradually being challenged. Unlike the first feminist movement, which was exclusive to the elite class, the second feminist movement, which began in the 1960s, focused on many aspects such as family, politics and society. Patriarchy became the main focus of the women's movement during this period, and feminist advocates attacked the male-dominated rights mechanism. The issue of "independent women" was brought up during this period. In Disney princess films, the "new princesses" come from different classes and have different skin colors. They break away from the previous sweet and gentle appearance and have a more individual and diverse appearance. And with a nascent awareness of women's rights, the princesses are more independent and self-aware, trying to break free from the constraints of the outside world and have a spirit of adventure and exploration. The adventurous spirit of Ariel exploring the human world in "The Little Mermaid", Bella's brave spirit in "Beauty and the Beast", and Mulan's heroic spirit of taking her father's place in the army in "Mulan" all show that Disney is gradually moving the image of princesses towards personalization and diversification as it ADAPTS to the wave of feminism. The female image of this stage is a breakthrough from the traditional notion of the early princess image being monotonous and centered on the male-dominated society.

3.2 The update of the princess image

With the development of the feminist wave, the image of princesses has been updated, and there have been subtle changes in the portrayal of male characters in Disney princess movies. With the fading of gender bias, the prince is no longer just a handsome and wealthy man compared to the male image in the early princess films. There are ordinary people like Aladdin and the ugly appearance of the prince in the early days of Beauty and the Beast. And as female characters are no longer confined to being vassals of male characters, their adventurous and pioneering feminist consciousness has gained some male recognition, such as Ariel, the little mermaid exploring the new world, who received her father's last help to transform into a human form, and Mulan, who took her father's place to join the army, who was recognized and respected by the emperor with the highest power. This shows that women's rights movement has gained more tacit consent and concessions from male-centered societies. But while the feminist movement fought for more power for women, the conservative men's movement began a fierce attack on the feminist movement in the 1980s, arguing that the rise of women had squeezed their superior social status, they rejected change, defended the traditional family model of upholding patriarchy, and opposed sexual liberation. The second feminist movement made a comeback under its impact and gradually faded away, and the rights women had fought for came under attack again. Disney princess films, under its influence, have continued the framework of earlier princess films, continuing the theme of love, promoting the supremacy of women's love, and although the princesses have a series of independent adventures, love remains the pursuit and destination of the princesses, and at critical moments, the prince is still the savior. The ending of the story and the destination of the princesses still cannot escape society's expectations of women.

This wavering and repetition of gender narratives present complex cultural symptoms in Disney princess films. Take "Pocahontas" as an example. Although Pocahontas shows a profound understanding of nature and herself and actively breaks down ethnic barriers, the film still ties her fate to the British explorer Smith at the end, using a romanticized love narrative to dissolve her independent will. In "The Little Mermaid", although Ariel explores the human world with a brave attitude, she has to achieve an identity transformation by giving up her voice and relying on the prince. This setting of "sacrificing one's own traits to integrate into the male world" reveals the deep-seated predicament hidden beneath the surface of gender equality.

Meanwhile, the functional transformation of male roles is also full of contradictions. In "Beauty and the Beast", although the beast subverts the traditional image of the prince with "ugliness", its essence is still to return to the traditional male authority through taming and redemption. In "Aladdin", the male protagonist of a commoner background seems to break through the shackles of class and gender, but in fact, he achieves success through the external support of magic rings and elves, implicitly relying on the traditional path to male success. This creative model

not only attempts to cater to the market demand of the awakening of female consciousness, but also finds it difficult to completely break free from the shackles of conservative social concepts. It repeatedly tests between gender equality and traditional order, and eventually forms a mixed narrative style that embraces change while adhering to conventions, reflecting the contradictions and struggles during the transformation period of social gender concepts^[2].

Although the "new princesses" created by Disney princess movies during this period failed to completely break the passive situation of early princesses, driven by the ideological trends of The Times, the traits that princesses possess have become more diverse, and their feminist consciousness has already awakened. From Ariel, who explores the unknown world, to Hua Mulan, who joins the army in place of her father, these images break through the shackles of tradition and demonstrate the independent and tenacious power of women. Meanwhile, male characters have also broken away from the early single image of heroes and nobles and begun to present more diverse character layers and personality traits. This acute capture and positive response to social trends not only injects new creative vitality into Disney princess films but also lays a solid foundation for the innovative development of subsequent works, enabling princess films to continuously evoke emotional resonance and profound thinking among audiences in the constantly changing background of The Times.

4 A fully developed princess image and a male character whose status is suppressed

4.1 A brand-new transformation of the princess image

The themes of the films in this stage are mainly about the princesses' self-growth, and the endings are all about the harvest of family affection and a good life. And the film's portrayal of the princess is more full, showing her bravery and independence while also depicting the mistakes she made due to her impulsiveness or rashness, and showcasing her self-growth and inner transformation in the process of making up for those mistakes. The princesses at this stage no longer follow the early docile and obedient image. They have a rebellious spirit and a pursuit of freedom. Their actions are no longer stiff but strong and vigorous, heroic in protecting their families and defending their country. Like Merida in "Brave", she is skilled in archery, refuses to be arranged in marriage, and tries to change her fate. Although she mistakenly believes that a witch has killed her mother, in the process of saving her mother, she unites other tribes and gradually changes her mother's mind, taking her fate into her own hands. And with the continuous development of the consumer society, the improvement of women's economic status leads to a continuous increase in their spending power. In specific fields such as beauty, clothing, and star-chasing, women's spending power is even leading or dominant. This further promotes Disney's emphasis on female gender consciousness in its films. First of all, Disney is presenting a diverse and varied image of women. The princesses at this stage have different skin colors, ages, abilities, identities, and the princesses' dashing and brave "rescue operations" and the independent personality they exude are all highly personal, giving audiences more enjoyment of the heroic spirit of women in the film. Secondly, Disney is also increasingly favoring female aesthetics in the styling of its princesses in an attempt to drive the development of movie-related merchandise. At this stage, the beauty of princess looks has been redefined, and the aesthetic of princesses has become increasingly diverse. Princess Raya in Raya has a deep brown complexion, a heroic face, and a martial arts-style outfit that showcases her heroic spirit; Moana in Moana, with her wheat-colored skin, unrestrained curly hair and beach-style grass dress, has a natural and healthy appearance that brings princesses closer to ordinary people. The image of Princess Elsa in Frozen, with a crown on her head and a long, glittering dress, was beloved by audiences, and the movie merchandise based on her princess image generated huge profits for Disney. As a result, both the rise of women's self-awareness and their significant role in the consumer society have contributed to the development of "princess" characters in Disney films in a more independent and diverse direction, while the impact of the growing strength of female characters in Disney princess films has led to a shift in the status and characteristics of male characters.

4.2 The weakening of the male image

The strength and independence of the princess in the film, while the male image is weakened in Disney princess movies. Since the beginning of the new century, with the strengthening of feminism and the equalization of rights between women and men, men have gradually lost their central position as saviors in early Disney princess films. This role has been replaced by independent and courageous princess images, and men have been mainly portrayed as assistants and saviors of the princesses during this period. Even the villainous roles that were typically played by women in early princess films. In the pursuit of gender equality, the male image in princess films was created at this stage as an assistant, a capable companion to the princess in her exploration of self-growth, which broke the male-dominated and female-subordinate character setting, like the boy Abo in "Raya" who joined Raya's rescue plan and took her to various ethnic regions; Maui in Moana is a companion on Moana's adventure to find her goddess; In Frozen, Christopher is Anna's

companion in her quest to find her sister and fight against the evil forces. The film's suspense at the end leads viewers to believe that he can save Anna, but the twist of setting Elsa as the ultimate savior is enough to show that Disney princess movies at this time have overturned the previous pattern of princesses being saved by princes. Male characters also appear as saviors, the most obvious example being Bella's father Punga and other male members who were saved in "Raya", who were transformed into stone statues and finally turned into their original forms by the power of Raya. The appearance of such characters is the best evidence of the strength and courage of the princesses in the adventure of rescue. It also highlights how women can break away from men and rely on their own strength to be powerful. The appearance of the male antagonists Hans and the butler in Frozen, who deceive women's feelings through conspiracy to achieve their own goals, breaks the stereotype that the antagonists are always played by women under the male gaze, and also indicates the gradual awakening of female consciousness and the fading of gender bias^[3].

5 Conclusion

From the gentle and beautiful submissive characters waiting for redemption on the early screen to the brave warriors who dare to break free from constraints and save the world today, the transformation history of Disney princesses is just like a visual epic of the awakening of female consciousness. Under the continuous influence of feminist thought, these classic characters have not only made a magnificent transformation from "objects of gaze" to "active actors", but also woven the spiritual map of women's growth into the collective memory of global audiences with delicate narratives. Correspondingly, the positioning of male characters in princess movies has also undergone a subversive reconstruction - gradually transforming from unshakable "saviors" to partners in equal dialogue and even objects that need to be saved. This replacement of role relationships not only reflects the profound adjustment of the gender power structure in contemporary society, but also confirms the increasing say of women in the consumer market and cultural fields.

About the Author

Mei Qin, master's candidate, research direction: film studies.

References

- [1] Yuan Xinning. Princess Disney animation film in the new century transformation research [D]. Shandong normal university, 2022.
- [2] Sun Chengwen. An Analysis of the changes in Female images in Disney Princess Animated films [J]. Literature and Art Weekly, 2022(10): 61-64.
- [3] Tian Yuhui. Viewing the Development of Disney Princess Films from the perspective of the Feminist Wave - Three Periods of the Development of Disney Princess Films [J]. Journal of Jiamusi Vocational College, 2022, 38(11): 73-75.