The Transformation of Woman’s Portrayal and Gender Roles in Disney Princess Movies

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ABSTRACT
Movies have brought a lot of significance in our life. The combination of art, technology, entertainment and business in movies are able to captivate its audience to be carried away with the story. Additionally, movies, as the product of popular culture, can also be the media to convey certain values and ideas. Though the notion of equality between men and women has emerged since several years ago, but the depiction of women in the media still base on the stereotypes which are around in the society. Nonetheless, Disney becomes one of the prominent production houses which able to sell and distribute its movies to all over the world. Among many movies produced under Disney’s production, Disney princess movies, which rooted from fairytale’s adaptation, become the most successful movies of Disney. This paper aims to see the changes and transformation related to the woman’s portrayal, gender roles and gender stereotypes in Disney princess’ movies. Thus, this paper employs interdisciplinary approach and uses the reconciliation of tenses theory, representation theory and gender theory to discuss this topic. Interestingly, as Disney produces newer princesses, there are certain changes happened to the portrayal of the princess in order to keep up with what happen in the society.

KEYWORD: Disney, woman’s portrayal, gender, movies

Consciously or unconsciously, movies have brought a lot of significance in our life. The combination of art, technology, entertainment and business in movies are able to captivate its audience to be carried away with the story. Aside to serve as a form of entertainment, movies can also reflect the culture where the movies are produced and the culture where the movies take place. Additionally, movies, as the product of popular culture, can also be the media to convey certain values and ideas. Nachbar
(1992), as cited in Puspita (2015), claims that popular culture is a “funhouse mirror” because it reflects our “image” back to us and alters our image in the process of doing so (Puspita, p.2). Thus, movies are able to bring new experiences inspired by the society and able to bridge ideas and culture to the wider audiences.

Talking about movies, the role of movie industry in America cannot be belittled - it becomes the benchmark for movies for all around the world. Within the movie industries in America, Disney becomes one of the prominent production house which able to sell and distribute its movies to all over the world. May (1971) notes that the success of Disney in film is because, “One of Disney’s greatest achievements in the realm of film was to replace the reader’s desire to pursue a book’s theme through the viewing pleasure of lighthearted American entertainment” (May, p.464). Thus, it can be said that the success of Disney’s movies relies on their ability to change the narrative into American movies. Henceforth, Disney princess’ movies, which rooted from fairytale’s adaptation, turn into the most successful movies of Disney. These movies revolve around the story of a princess, the main character, who seeks for something in her life and, in the most of the movies, needs a prince to save or help them. Thus, in a glance it can be assumed that the movies deploy a certain stereotypes to portray the woman. Furthermore, these Disney princesses’ movies deliver a certain role and value which is expected by the society. Interestingly, as Disney produces a newer princess, there are certain changes happened to the portrayal of the princess in order to keep up with what happen in the society.

Nevertheless, amongst many values and ideas which are conveyed in the movies, the discussion of women in the movies becomes one of the interesting issues to be discussed in the academic field. Though the notion of equally between men and women has been emerged since several years ago, but the depiction of woman in the
media still based on the stereotypes which are around in the society. Wood opines that “all forms of media communicate images of the sexes, many of which perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical and limited perceptions…..women are underrepresented, which falsely implies that men are the cultural standard and women are unimportant or visible” (Wood, p.231). Thus, from the quotation it can be seen that the media, including movies, does not showcases the realistic images of woman. Even worst, the depiction of relationships between men and women emphasize traditional roles and normalize violence against women. Furthermore, movies which put the women as the focus are limited. Movies with women as the leading characters usually categorized in the more specified genres, for example drama, romance, comedy, etc, -more limited compared to that of with men characters- and tells about the life of women with the women as the specific audience (Amalia, p. 2).

In relation to the Disney princess’ movies, these movies hold several values, ideas and images of women within the society. Whether it is acknowledged or not, Disney princess movies utilize woman’s portrayal and gender roles as one of its elements in it. Majorly marketed for young girls and women, it depicted how women are expected to behave and think by the society. Thus, the ideas within the movies will indirectly shape attitude and behavior of its viewers. Considering the significance of Disney princess’ movies in influencing the view on women in the society, this paper will focus on how the movies depicted woman’s portrayal and gender roles. Deliberately, the analysis of this paper mainly focuses on the discussion of how woman is portrayed in Disney princess’ movies from the 20th century until 21st century. Aside from what have been mentioned, this research will also highlight the transformation of woman’s portrayal in Disney princess’ movies by observing and comparing the changing that happen in the Disney’s princesses from 20th century up to 21st century.
Equally important, the gender roles of woman that are depicted in the movies will also be discussed in this paper.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

This paper is conducted under the qualitative research. According to Berg (2001), he defines qualitative research as a research which seeks answers of the questions through examining various social setting and the individuals who inhabit the setting, and how inhabitants of the settings make sense of their surrounding through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles and so forth (Berg, pp.6-7). The qualitative research examines various social setting and issues and the interpretation of the problem or the issue is based on the perspective of the researchers. The focus is discovering the characteristic of particular affairs under the research. In accordance with the qualitative research, the research will emphasize on the researcher’s interpretation because this research is related to the interpretative design. It can be said that the data will be interpreted in a subjective manners as the biases, values and personal background will influence the interpretation process.

Disney princess movies used in this paper are *Snow White and the seven dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Alladin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan* (1998), *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010) and *Brave* (2012). *Snow White and the seven dwarfs, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Alladin, Pocahontas, and Mulan* are the movies released in the 20th century while *The Princess and the Frog, Tangled* and *Brave* are the movies released in the 21st century. These movies are chosen because the princesses in these movies are the official Disney princesses, which mean they are acknowledged by Disney as the representatives of the Disney’s princesses. Even though there are still other princesses are existed and other
female characters are presented in the movies, they will not be included in the discussion.

The paper employs interdisciplinary approach as the main approach since this paper integrates theories from different disciplines. Newell and Green (1982) define interdisciplinary approach as “inquiries which critically draw upon two or more disciplines and which lead to an integration of disciplinary insights” (Haynes, 2002:17 as cited in Jones, p. 76). Therefore, interdisciplinary approach combines two or more disciplines to get a new perspective of insights related to a certain matters. Similarly, in McDowell’s reconciliation of academic discipline proposes that interdisciplinary is a way of understanding a culture by seeing it from different perspective; the perspective itself is coming from understanding the details of the culture from various academic disciplines’ point of view. However, it does not mean that it happens abruptly by bringing several disciplines together in to the research; it needs effort to decide which disciplines to be used together to resolve the problems.

The theory of reconciliation of tenses by Tremaine McDowell is used in this paper because this paper will observe the changes which happens to the princesses of Disney princess’ movies from the 20th century until 21st century. Reconciliation of tenses refers to “a method which based on the idea that what happens at present is always related to the past and the present will always influence the events of tomorrow, therefore an analysis should be based on the inter-relating events of the past, present and future” (Pratama, p.22). It can be said that reconciliation of tenses emphasizes that the events which happen in the past, present and future is related and the present and future events are dependent to the past event.
Representation theory and theory of gender are also used by design. Representation is the production of meaning though language or to describe or symbolize something. Hall proposes

“….language work through representation. They are ‘system of representation’...all the practices ‘work like language’, not because they are all written or spoken (they are not), but because they all use some element to stand for or represent what we want to say, to express or communicate a thought, concept, idea or feeling..” (Hall, p.4).

It can be implied that language has a part within itself which can represent what we meant to say and help us to communicate. Further, there is something that is called as system of representation. It is called as so because it consists of different ways of organizing and arranging concepts of to differentiate one concept to another because one person might have different concept to another person because they have their own conceptual ideas about a particular things. The shared conceptual map is the elements which help us to be able to understand and communicate with each other.

Aside from representation theory by Stuart Hall, the theory of gender role and stereotypes are used in the discussion of this research. Gender is the social attributes, opportunities and relationship that are associated with being feminine and masculine (Knapp, Muller, Quiros, p.1). Thus, gender is different from sex since sex refers to the given biological status and condition of someone while gender is the status from the criteria which is created by the society. Gender roles can be divined as the perceived set of behavior and role which is connected to males and females in a social group and system. Additionally, gender roles consist of activities that men and women engage in with different frequencies (Brannon, p.160), because men is seen as the stronger party so they will handle more the physical works rather than the women. These gender roles
then become an idea accepted as masculine and feminine because it is associated with men and women. Further, the gender roles which will be discussed in this research are the gender roles of woman as the main focus of this paper related to woman. So, other gender roles, for example the gender roles of man, will not be discussed in this paper. In relation to the gender roles, only the gender stereotypes of women which will be discussed.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

“I am the Princess - The Fairest among All”

The first and most noticeable change which happened to the Disney’s princesses is the existence of woman of color as the princesses. From the first princess movie in 1937, Disney exclusively uses a White woman or a Caucasian woman as the princess - from Snow White to Belle, all of these princesses are White women. Though the notion of racial discrimination abolishment had been reverberated since 1950s in America, only on the sixth movie in 1992 the first colored princess, Jasmine, appeared as the official Disney’s princess. After Jasmine, impressively and consecutively, Disney releases three more princesses from colored women before using White women again as the princesses.

This existence of princesses from the non-White groups suggests that there is a change slightly in the woman’s portrayal in the media. As in the past people were most likely prefer to see women with the beauty standard from Whites or Western’s perspectives, there were tendency to only White women at the media. Especially in the United States, the media is very white-washed so there was no surprise that the princesses were white women. However, with the racial equality issues and feminist movement from the women of color, the media slowly opened up to the ideas of
promoting the beauty of non-White women. Disney also took part in this matter by starting to create a non-White princess to be the center of their animated movies.

Interestingly, instead of using Native American, Chinese, Latina or African-American women who were closer to their daily life, Disney opted to use a Middle Eastern woman as the first colored princess. The rationale behind this decision is likelihood because of Orientalism in America. Orientalism in America contains meaning as an expression of cultural superiority by means of material possession and, mostly paying attention to the Arab lands of the Middle East, it began to emerge as a distinct aesthetic as American retail strategy to exploit “Orientalist images of exotic lands associated with luxury and sensuality, if not debauchery” (Rosenblatt, p.53). Therefore, based on this reason, Disney utilized Jasmine as an Arabian princess to be the representation the exoticism, luxury and mysteriousness of Far East.

Further, it can be proposed that the changes of the woman’s portrayal in the physical appearance are hardly occurred in Disney princess’ movies. Putting aside the racial physical characteristics, all of the princesses share the same appearance formula: tall, slim, hourglass-shaped figure, big eyes, thick lips and luscious hair. Probably, the only change that happens is on the size of the waist. Starting by Cinderella, there is a notably change that the waist is getting smaller to the point of unnatural. Among the 20th century princesses, only Snow White whose waist is comparatively realistic compared to others. However, the two latest princesses, Rapunzel and Merida, start to own a more realistic waist compared to their predecessors.

Towbin and her colleagues write that in many films, the female characters, both human and animal, are portrayed as overly sexual and typically have unnaturally small waists, large breasts, big eyes and batting eyelashes (Chyng, 2001 as cited in Bispo, pp.6-7). In line with Towbin and her colleagues’ statement, looking thoroughly at the
princesses, their physical appearances have the standardized beauty which applies to most if not all of the princesses. While it cannot be denied that Disney princess’ movies are pictured to please the eyes of the audience, this portrayal of woman is unrealistic and very idealistic. These distinct features as the cachet of beauty create the fallacy that people must own these distinct features to be called beautiful. The definition of beauty becomes monogamous and it fails to embrace the fact that women come from different size and appearances. Furthermore, this standardized beauty of the princesses can represent the basic ideas in the society that women are expected to be alluring with sensual features and thin be worthy. As the effect, this representation of beauty will create a disorientation of body-image in the society.

**Woman’s Gender Roles in Disney: the Damsels in Distress and the Independent Lady**

Though there are no significant changes in how woman is portrayed in the movies, but there are some significant changes in respect of gender roles and gender stereotypes. Prior to the discussion, it is important to propose that gender roles and gender stereotypes are usually related to one another. While gender roles related to the behavior done by the men and women, gender stereotypes are “the representative of a society’s collective’s knowledge about masculinity and femininity” (Crespi, p.3). So, gender roles contribute the material for gender stereotypes. Foremost, gender stereotypes are very influential in making the conceptualization of women and men in social categories by gender.

Hereinafter, Brannon (2008) lists that the stereotypic traits of women are pious, submissive, domestic and pure (Brannon, p.174). The first three princesses or the classic princesses, Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora, showcase that they fit into these traits and the classic archetypes of woman’s gender role and gender stereotypes.
Their submissive traits are reflected through their quietness, classiness, gracefulness and composedness. They portray the perfect women as they fulfill every aspect which the society expected them to be. Moreover, they are damsels in distress as they expect other people, especially the male characters, to save them. The three princesses strengthen the stereotypes that women are dependent to men and the only way to feel secure is by being protected by men. They passively wait for the men to help them and save them for misery. Furthermore, they are also very domestic as they are very neat & nurturing and do the house chores very well. They are doing the expected gender role to be personally felt fulfilled. During this time, the women can obtain their identity and role in the society when they are married and become mothers. Leitch proposes that women in this time are “… the housewife-mother – the model for all women, portraying women’s ideal reality as narrow domestic round of cooking, cleaning, washing, and childbearing. To find fulfillment and achieve identity in this regime, women had to accept sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing motherhood” (Leitch, p.308). Henceforth, in order to obtain their identity, the princesses do the domestic jobs and without second thought agreeing to marry the princes. Their definition of “happily ever after” lies to the fact that they marry the princes and always have other people to help when they need it.

The princesses following these classic princesses have some improvement regarding their gender roles and gender stereotypes. They are not damsels in distress anymore like Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora. They do still have the traditional gender role and stereotypes, like nurturing and feminine, attach to them, but there are gender roles and gender stereotypes which they break. Take Ariel for instance. Ariel breaks the stereotypes that women should be domestic and stay at home. She is more adventurous and curious about the life outside the domestic side that her predecessors.
Though her goal is still similar to the previous princesses to find the true love, but she is more active in pursuing her love. Rather than waiting, she decides to go and meet her prince by using her own ability. For the case of Belle, she advances in the terms of education and knowledge which makes her break the stereotypes during the time that women does not need to be educated. Belle represent the second wave feminist’s spirit which demand equality in education field. Other than that, Ariel, Belle and Jasmine share the same quality of aspiring to marry the man of their choices. Jasmine even strongly refuses to marry someone if she is only seen as a price of possession. This view break the traditional images of stereotypical characteristics that ideal women are expected to be possessed (Bispo, p.4). Despite the fact that Ariel, Belle and Jasmine are able to break several gender stereotypes, but they are still bound to the traditional gender roles which are set by the society. Their identity and final goal are still revolving around finding true love and husband. Moreover, there are still dependent to the male character to achieve their goal.

Deliberately, both Pocahontas and Mulan challenge more roles and stereotypes existed in the society. Both of the characters are actively pursuit their goal and making their love life not as their main goal. While the previous princesses’ goal is to achieve romance, Pocahontas and Mulan aim for their family and community’s happiness. Mulan even challenge the stereotypes that woman need man to protect her. She proves that woman can protect themselves even be save the man and be something else aside from doing the domestic job.

Nevertheless, the last three princesses which created in the 21st century are more varied in portraying the gender roles. Indeed, gender roles constructed the idea that males are supposed to be adventurous, assertive aggressive, independent and task-oriented, while females should be sensitive, gentle, dependent, emotional and people
oriented based on the activities that they do. However, the newest princesses are able to break from these gender roles. They become more goal-driven and show less romanticization of love. Tiana from *the Princess and the Frog* is the princess who relies on own ability. She even becomes the breadwinner for the family after her father passed away - she is confident with herself and able to act as the leader. Looking closely at Tiana, the reason why she can be independent is because the culture of her society shapes her to be like so. As Tiana coming from African American background, the women from this society play the most important role to maintain and keep the household together. Hence, the women should be able to be independent and strong in order to keep the family. Nevertheless, Tiana, Rapunzel and Merida represent the modern women who are able to make their own decisions. They are the portrait the independency of a woman which comes after the entire obstacle to earn the rightful place. Tiana, Rapunzel and Merida also propose the idea of equality between man and woman. It is proven by the fact that they can criticize the male characters in the movies and have the same skills as the man and do not only rely on the beauty – which in the previous princess might be a bizarre idea. Similar to Mulan, Rapunzel and Merida also become the heroine which save the male characters by using their strength and wittiness. Merida even proves she does not need man’s help to be happy, powerful and successful. Additionally, Merida is the only official princess who does not have any love interest.

**CONCLUSION**

The Disney princess’ movies from the 20th century until 21st century contain woman’s portrayal in the media and the values of gender roles and gender stereotypes. Through the time, there are some transformations that happen to the princesses as the main characters. On one hand, the woman’s portrayal in physical appearance field does
not have significant transformation as Disney still use their formula of tall, slim, hourglass-shaped figure, big eyes, thick lips and luscious hair for their princesses. However, Disney finally use women of color as the princess even though the appearance still based on white standard. The existence of the colored princesses, at least, can be the gate opener to show the diversity of race for the princesses.

On the other hand, the biggest transformation happens to the gender roles and gender stereotypes. The princesses do not become the damsels in distress anymore. Instead, through the time, the princesses slowly become more active in pursuing their dreams. Furthermore, the recent princesses show a more goal-driven characteristic and broadening their life goal not only revolving around romance. To conclude, whether it is for the profit’s proposes, for example to be sold well, or not, but Disney are able to adapt their princesses into the more fitting social condition nowadays so that people can relate more to the characters. Thus, the transformation of the woman in the Disney princess’ movies cannot be separated from the changing in our society where nowadays women can work their way up to be equal to men.

REFERENCES


