



The Impact of Feminist Discourse on Disney Animation (From Stereotypical Portrayal into Empowered Females)

Reham AlBassam

Women's Studies Program, Deanship of Graduate Studies, Princess Norah bint Abdulrahman University, Saudi Arabia
Email: rehamalbassam@hotmail.com

Dr. Anoud Alhamad

English Literature Department, College of Languages, Princess Norah bint Abdulrahman University, Saudi Arabia
Email: aalhamad@pnu.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

Walt Disney has produced numerous masterpieces and animated films since 1923, being one of the leading entertainment industries. With the unforgettable choices of topics, themes and diverse portrayal of characters, this paper overviews the evolution of Disney portrayal of human female protagonists across selected films. A qualitative descriptive analysis interprets female protagonists in eight animated films depicted in the Classics, Renaissance, and the New Age eras. These include Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Cinderella (1950), Pocahontas (1995), Mulan (1998), Brave (2012), Frozen (2013-2019), Raya and the Last Dragon (2021), and Moana (2016-2024). This chronological overview focuses on the gendered behavior and stereotypical portrayal of female protagonists within the context of Eurocentric beauty standards. It traces the evolution of these portrayals through a theoretical framework of stereotypes as influenced by various waves of feminism, thereby enabling a nuanced investigation of the development of these characters from traditional princesses to empowered female protagonists.

Keywords: Disney Animated Films, Empowerment, Eurocentrism Feminist Discourse, Stereotype.



1. Introduction

Stereotypes are conceptualized as a mechanism employed to simplify the huge influx of information people encounter. They generally categorise individuals based on commonly known or shared perspectives and traits. A stereotype 'may be characterised as either negative or positive, accurate or inaccurate, justified or unjustified. It is primarily the negative, inaccurate, and unjustified stereotypes that raise significant concern' (Schneider, 1996). These stereotypes reside in cultural norms and societal assumptions as in gender expected behavior shaping individuals' perceptions and actions. Stereotype is defined as "societal beliefs and assumptions about how men and women should behave based on their gender. These stereotypes are often perpetuated in media and entertainment, including films" (Karma, and Bhad, 2023). This study examines the effect of the feminist discourse on female characters' transformation highlighting how these characters evolve to consider inclusivity in the recent productions. It will analyze a selection of female characters out of eight animated films from different decades. These include Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Cinderella (1950), Pocahontas (1995), Mulan (1998), Brave (2012), Frozen (2013-2019), Raya and the Last Dragon (2021) and Moana (2016-2024). The traditional gender stereotypes in Disney films as well as other media sources are framed by cultural contexts and these represented women as passive objects who required males' assistance to achieve their happiness.

In Disney's early productions, female protagonists reflected societal expectations, they are often depicted in stereotypical gender roles and Eurocentric beauty standards. The recent portrayal of female characters is influenced by societal consciousness and the discourse of feminist movement. The representations may resonate with feminist ideals of gender equality where more fluid gender roles with both masculine and feminine traits start to replace old stereotypical versions of Disney protagonists. From 1937 to 2024, women's social roles in these films drastically transformed. Female protagonists became less domestic, less submissive, assuming more powerful roles within their social contexts, Crafton, (2024). This study investigates the progressive portrayal of Disney's female protagonists from traditional princesses to empowered modern figures. It aims to present the evolution of female protagonists and encourage diverse and relatable representations that reflect modern societal values accurately.

1.1 Literature Review

The representation of female characters in Disney films has experienced significant transformation stages over the decades, reflecting societal consciousness and changing perceptions of gender roles in societies. Female characters are first portrayed according to traditional gender roles and cultural norms but lately, Disney has challenged these stereotypes through independent and empowered female portrayals. Many studies have criticised old portrayals of Disney female characters such as Snow White and Cinderella who precisely reflected traditional norms and Eurocentric beauty standards. Stereotypes of Female Characters in Disney by Elboraie, (2025) criticises these depictions for the lack of diversity and for negatively portraying female protagonists as passive and dependent on males who are considered



as secondary characters. Karma, and Bhad, (2023) also highlight that Disney has represented their earlier female characters according to the cultural gender norms, portraying them as mirrors of prevailing societal beliefs. Moreover, research identifies that Disney has challenged traditional gender stereotypes in its modern characters in recent productions. Traditional feminine traits of these stereotypes depict women as passive, spontaneous, dependent and with idealised beauty, Wellman, (2020). These studies highlight that early Disney productions promoted narrow representations of women at that time, reinforcing negative characteristics with focus on appearance, behavior and female agency.

With the rise of the feminist latest waves, Disney's portrayal of female characters began to change. According to Liu and Yang (2021), in the Transformation of Female Images in Disney Animated Films from the 20th to the 21st Century in the Context of the American Feminist Movement, the changes in the cultural attitudes influenced by the feminist movements encouraged Disney to introduce relatable female leads like Mulan and Pocahontas. These two characters challenge traditional norms and embrace self-agency. In addition, The Evolution of Disney Princesses and Its Impacts on Gender Roles and the Portrayal of Love Among Young Girls by Sun, (2023), acknowledges the progress of how modern female protagonists are portrayed as active and empowered, breaking away from the themes centered on societal gender roles and romantic stories. Jin, (2023), in Evolution of Disney Princesses and Its Impact on Young Girls also acknowledges the positive shift from traditional princesses to new generation of complex protagonists. Yet, the research addresses persistent portrayals of physical appearance in Disney's recent productions.

On the other hand, Disney positively attempts to inclusively introduce more female protagonists, especially in terms of race and culture. "The Revolution of Female Characters in Disney Films" highlights that new characters like Pocahontas and Mulan represent a step toward cultural inclusion (Susanto and Imanjaya, 2022). Similarly, Liu and Yang (2021), emphasise that Disney has introduced new characters from various racial backgrounds. In "Representation in Raya and the Last Dragon: Examining the Progression of Gender, Sexuality, and Race in the Disney Princess Franchise" (2023). Hicks also asserts that Disney now works to move away from outdated depictions by embracing a more progressive stance on gender norms and racial representation. For instance, Moana represents a significant step forward in featuring a heroine of color, while Raya marks a notable advancement in Disney's commitment to racial diversity. Moreover, "Disney's Female Gender Roles: The Change of Modern Culture" by Barber (2015), claims that the shift of portraying female characters is not coincidental but a reflection of the feminist movement and a growing of the public demand for empowered and diverse female representations.

While many studies acknowledge the progressive portrayal of Disney female characters, others highlight the persistent contradictions. For instance, Priya (2022) argues that traditional gender stereotypes and sexism remain embedded in Disney's narratives, even in recent productions. Zhai (2022) too shares the same concerns, acknowledging the positive shift in the characters' traits but indicating the limited progress in body representations and diversity. On the other hand, Seybold, in "It's



Called a Hustle, Sweetheart: Zootopia, Moana, and Disney's (Dis)Empowered Postfeminist Heroines" (2021), argues that the animated movie of Moana traps its female protagonist in the "double entanglement" of post-feminism by acknowledging the female protagonist's success of her mission only when she allows the male costar to direct their partnership. For Seybold, Moana matches the typical "damsel in distress" princess stereotype, which means Disney continues to celebrate male's dominance over female counterparts.

In Semiotic Analysis of Women's Representation in the Animated Disney Film Raya and The Last Dragon (2022), Wardah and Kusuma explain that in the modern era, Disney began to show a princess or female main character as independent, intelligent, heroic and equal to men. Especially in Brave and Frozen, which indicate that Disney begins to destroy traditional gender roles. Moreover, Shehatta, (2020), reveals the challenging traditional gender norms through analyzing the character of Merida, the protagonist of Brave in Breaking Stereotypes: A Multimodal Analysis of The Representation of The Female Lead in The Animation Movie Brave. The study presents Merida as a female leader who challenges the typical "damsel in distress" princess, which indicates a huge shift in Disney's portrayal of female characters. In addition, Ambarwati, (2022), analyzes the portrayal of women's empowerment in the animated movie Raya and The Last Dragon in The Representation of Women's Empowerment Depicted in the Movie Raya and The Last Dragon, (2021). The author acknowledges that Disney is shifting the narrative from traditional princesses to empowered female figures.

All the above literature on the stereotypical portrayal of Disney female characters have discussed how these stereotypes have been established and normalised over decades. Eventually, Disney started creating androgynous characters who defy binary gender roles and emphasise traits like bravery, emotional intelligence, and leadership (Hine, England, Lopreore, Skora and Hartwell, 2018). This transformation reflects the change in the societal attitudes towards femininity, acknowledging the influence of the feminist movement. Although positive progress has been made in Disney's recent productions, researchers call for more efforts in bringing up more relatable characters in future productions to encourage women to pursue their goals and inspire future generations.

1.2 Research Questions:

The study thus attempts to answer the question related to the evolution of the portrayal of Disney female protagonists in two parts in the following:

1. In what ways do Disney animated films portray female characters over different decades, from 1937 to 2024?
2. How have these portrayals evolved in response to changing societal gender norms and the feminist discourse?



1.3 Objectives

According to the previous questions, this paper aims to achieve the following:

1. Identify the stereotypical portrayal of female characters in Disney's animated films.
2. Explore how these portrayals have evolved over the decades and trace the evolution of female portrayal according to the feminist discourse.

2. Methodology

The paper employs a qualitative descriptive methodology to examine the evolution of the stereotypical portrayal of females in Disney films. It traces how Disney constructs and transforms its representations of female human characters across eight animated films produced during various decades. The films have been selected for their representation of distinct eras: The Classics, Renaissance, and the New Age. These are Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), Cinderella (1950), Pocahontas (1995), Mulan (1998), Brave (2012), Frozen (2013-2019), Raya and the Last Dragon (2021) and Moana (2016-2024). This chronological selection allows for a comprehensive thematic analysis informed by theoretical frameworks concerning Eurocentric beauty stereotypes and the impact of feminist discourse related to gender roles in Disney representations of females at those eras. Thus, character analysis is based on some elements related to two main comparative categories which are beauty standards and gender role. The component elements of the first category (beauty standard) are: race, skin tone, facial features, hair color and texture and body shape. The second standard (gender role) comprises elements of feminine/masculine traits, occupational roles and leadership, and domestic roles and responsibilities.

By examining these films in their historical context within these two categories, the study aims to trace the evolution of female characters' portrayals, highlighting the transition from traditional princess archetypes to more empowered and agency-driven figures. A detailed analysis of protagonists in each film is conducted, focusing on character traits, narrative roles, and the overarching themes that reflect societal attitudes toward gender. This analysis will be supported by the intersection of media representations and related feminist theory. Additionally, the study will incorporate a comparative analysis to identify shifts in character portrayal over time, examining how changes in societal norms and feminist discourse have influenced these representations. In summary, this qualitative descriptive approach will provide perception into the ways in which Disney's animated films reflect, challenge and reshape cultural perceptions of femininity, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on the representation of gender in Disney films.



Chart 1: Disney Female Protagonists

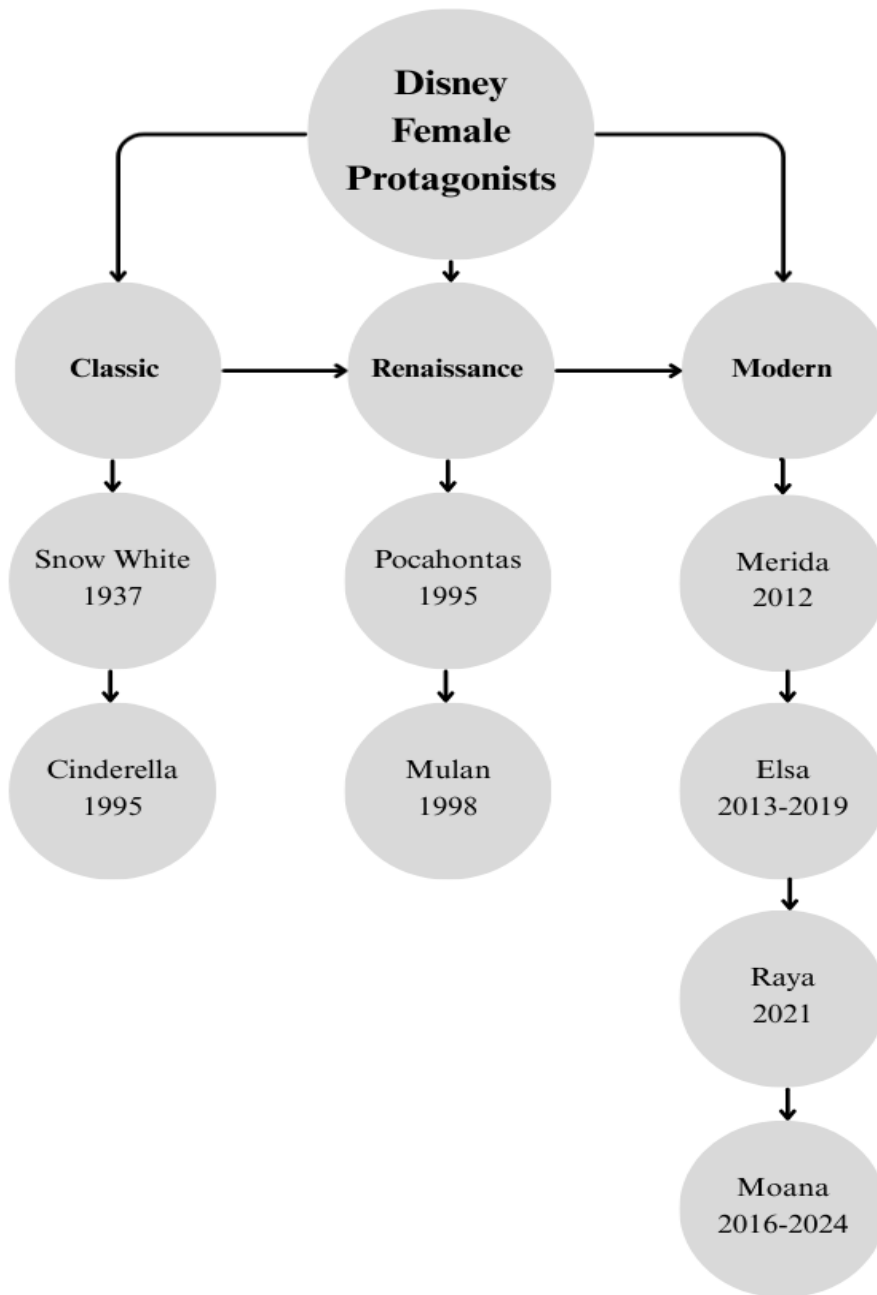
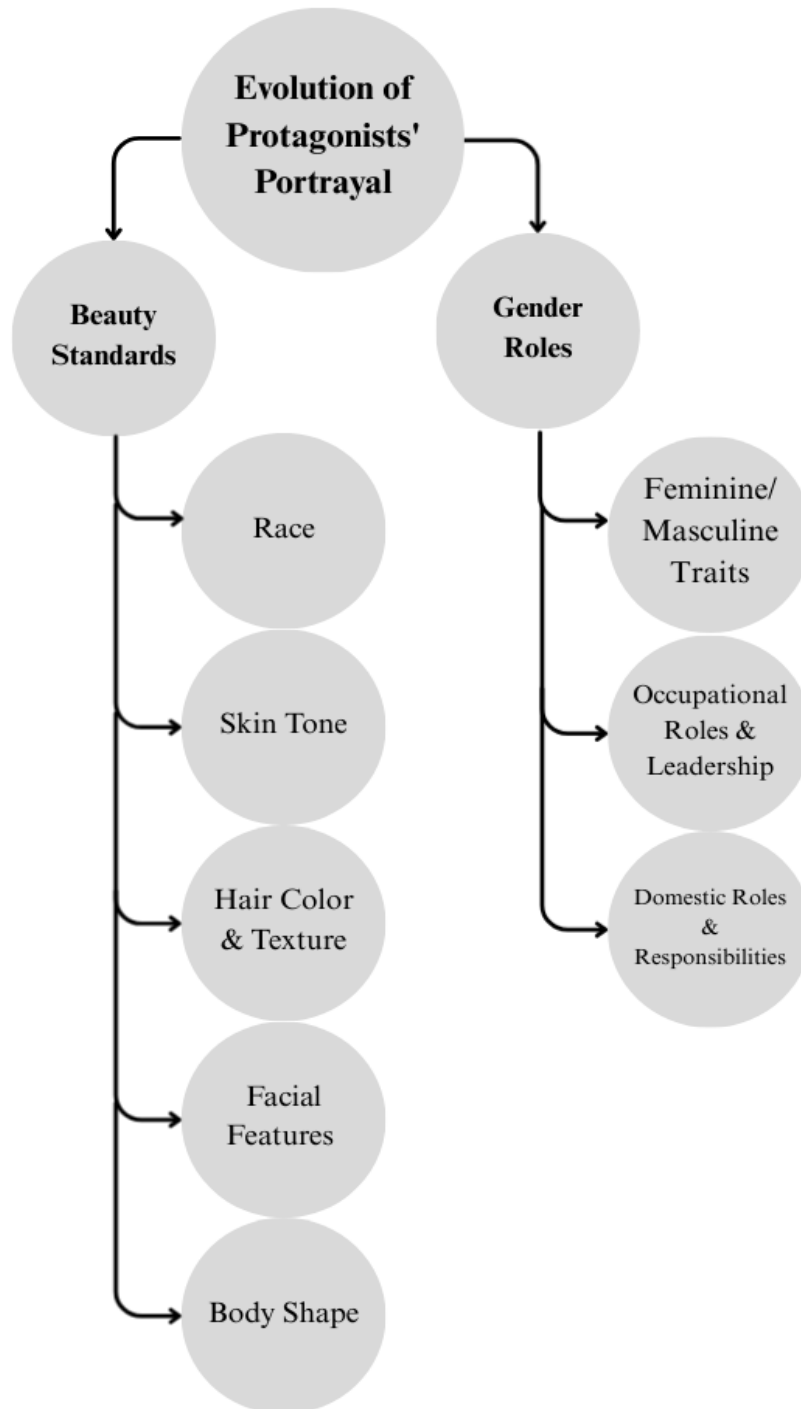




Chart 2: Evolution of Protagonists' Portrayal





Before proceeding with the analysis of the evolution of protagonists in Disney films, the following table presents a concise overview of the selected female protagonists, focusing on two key criteria: beauty standards and gender roles.

Table 1: Protagonists' Portrayal based on Beauty Standards and Gender Role

Female Protagonists & Film Title	Classic Protagonists		Renaissance Protagonists		Modern Protagonists				
	Snow (White Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937)	Cinderella (Cinderella, 1950)	Pocahontas (Pocahontas, 1995)	Mulan (Mulan, 1998)	Merida (Brave, 2012)	Elsa (Frozen, 2013-2019)	Raya (Raya and the Last Dragon, 2021)	Moana (Moana, 2016-2024)	
1	Beauty Standard Elements								
1.1	Race	German/ European	European	Native American	Chinese/ Asian	Scottish/ European	Scandinavian/ European	Southeast Asian	Polynesian
1.2	Skin Tone	Fair	Fair	Brown	Medium	Fair	Fair	Medium	Brown
1.3	Hair Color and Texture	Black & Straight	Blonde & Straight	Black & Straight	Black & Straight	Orange Curly & Messy	Blonde & Straight	Dark Brown & Wavy	Dark Brown & Curly
1.4	Facial Features	Rosy Cheeks & Red Lips with Brown Eyes	Small Nose & Blue Eyes	High Cheekbones & Dark Brown Eyes	Smiley Face with Almond-Shaped Dark Brown Eyes	Rounded Face with Full cheeks & Blue Eyes	Small Nose & Blue Large Eyes	Full Lips & Dark Brown Eyes	Wide Nose & Full Lips with Brown Large Eyes
1.5	Body Shape	Petite	Slim	Athletic & Tall	Fit	Curvy	Slim	Athletic & fit	Curvy & Short
2	Gender Roles Elements								
2.1	Feminine/Masculine Traits	Nurturing	Kind	Wise and brave	Compassionate family-oriented warrior	Determined archer	Emotionally Complex independent	Determined/family-oriented warrior	Caring And brave



2.2	Occupational Roles and Leadership	Princess	Later a Princess	Nature Caretaker	Soldier	Princess/ Future Leader	Queen	Warrior	Chief
2.3	Domestic Roles and Responsibilities	Caregiver to the Dwarfs	Servant for Stepfamily	None	Rejects Domestic Roles	Rejects royal traditions and behaviors	None	None	None

In the first Disney animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the protagonist Snow White is presented as a beautiful slim young lady with a tiny waist. According to Priya, (2022), Snow White is a perfect example of a stereotypical weak princess. However, she is shown as weak, naïve and submissive regardless of being the protagonist of the film. Snow White helplessly waits for the hero to rescue her from her stepmother. As reported by Davis (2014), females in early Disney animations have been portrayed as helpless in a position of absolute vulnerability, whose only chance of being rescued is to be helped by a prince. Another stereotypical depiction is when Snow White lives with the seven dwarfs, she spontaneously cooks and does house chores as a housewife (Maity, 2014).

Similarly, as table 1 shows, Cinderella follows Eurocentric beauty standards. She is beautiful, kind, thin and blonde. However, she is a victim of her envious stepmother and stepsisters. Cinderella is passively subordinate to them and does nothing but dream of the hero's intervention and salvation. Despite the fact that men only have a minor role in the entire film, they have the most influence on the princesses' lives (Sun, 2023). Both Snow White and Cinderella have been criticised for reinforcing traditional gender norms and stereotypical images of women (Elboraie, 2025). Itmeizeh, and Ma'ayeh (2017) asserts that 'Disney princesses are beautiful, thin, young, with fair skin and big eyes, and is accompanied by the character traits of being weak, helpless, fragile, romantic, controlled, sometimes troublesome, waiting for the prince's protection and rescue.' Mainstream feminism was shaped by European standards of femininity and social roles, which often represents all women as Eurocentric ideals of femininity, ignoring race and class. In like manner, Snow White and Cinderella base their happily ever after around men (Wellman, 2020).

'According to Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* which launched the second wave of feminism, the book questions women's inferior positions and passive roles in society. She believed that woman is not born but made. In other words, women are not born feminine but socially constructed. A woman's identity is constructed by social expectations, cultural practices, and norms. This idea is called social constructionism.' (Bhatta, 2023). In contrast, two adventurous female characters appeared at that time; namely, Pocahontas and Mulan. Pocahontas and Mulan's depictions went through big progress. As table one displays, they are both from different cultures, races and colors. Disney made some notable efforts to diversify female protagonists (Elboraie, 2025). Pocahontas and Mulan are both rebellious and different from the earlier protagonists. As claimed by Sun (2023):



“Disney broke traditional fairytale by depicting strong independent female characters who do not dream of the prince. The love story in both animated films is not the main theme anymore. In the second era, women began to have independent personalities, pursue freedom and gradually free themselves from patriarchal thought.”

Pocahontas is a native American whose story includes a cultural identity, heritage, and the struggle against colonization, highlighting the unique challenges faced by women of color. Similarly, Mulan is Chinese who represents the struggle for equality and independence. She adopts a male disguise to safeguard her father and defend her country. As stated by Karma, and Bhad, (2023): ‘Mulan's character challenges traditional gender roles by showing that women can be strong and independent and can excel in male-dominated roles.’ Unlike Snow White and Cinderella, Pocahontas and Mulan are two rebellious and adventurous characters who are independent and do not need a prince’s rescue.

The second wave emerged in the 1960s and concentrated on gender equity and equal opportunities for women, whereas the third wave started in 1990s and shifted the focus to individuality, intersectionality and diversity, sisterhood and the complexity of women's experiences. The Disney “New Wave” marks a progressive shift towards the exclusion of “princess” characters, and inclusion of non-white, non-American female heroines to broaden their market appeal towards postmodern diversity while catering to the new expectations of its female audience (Susanto, and Imanjaya, 2022).

Furthermore, Disney went through a major shift in Brave and Frozen. Zhai (2023) thinks that ‘Princesses now demonstrate strength and leadership skills and no longer wait to be saved.’ Elboraie (2025) highlights that:

“The release of Brave marked a significant shift towards more progressive depictions of female characters. Merida represents a new type of female protagonist, one who refuses the constraints of arranged marriage. Making Merida the main character without being dependent on a male character. She challenges the traditional norms by embracing her flaws and asserting her identity. By labeling Merida as a true hero, Disney moves away from stereotypical gender roles and embraces a change of scenery.”

It is a giant move by Disney naming the animated movie Brave which means it is not a masculine term anymore. Merida also breaks the Eurocentric beauty standards by having curly messy hair. As per Jin, (2023), Merida has the character traits of self-confidence, courage, and daring to take risks. According to Zsubori, (2023) Merida, Mulan, and Pocahontas were each often referred to by the children as ‘not princessy’ princesses. Moving forward to another animated movie; Frozen has two breakthroughs; the first was the appearance of a double female protagonist for the first time (the sisters Elsa and Anna), and the second was the creation of the first Disney animated Queen, Elsa (Liu, and Yang, 2021). Elsa is strong and determined. She states that she is not the perfect girl anymore; “the perfect girl is gone.” However, Disney portrays Elsa again in relations to the Eurocentric beauty standards as a beautiful blonde young lady.



Disney's efforts at diversifying female protagonists remain an incomplete endeavor. Nevertheless, the themes of *Brave* and *Frozen* diverge from the conventional focus on romantic love. It revolves around family and achieving personal goals (Elboraie, 2025). In *Frozen*, Elsa and Merida shift away from a fixation on love and marriage, exploring new avenues for self-actualization. (Sun, 2023). Thus, 'Disney began to demonstrate the characteristics of an independent woman, it released princesses with androgynous personalities and traits such as Merida. (Hine et al., 2018). They are more goal-oriented and independent compared to princesses from the first era. Merida challenges traditional gender roles and expectations. She also rejects social pressures and focuses on self-growth, representing the modern perspective of women. Elsa on the other hand, represents the complexity of women's experiences. Moreover, her relationship with her sister Anna emphasises the importance of sisterhood and support among women.

The seventh animated film is *Moana* whose journey is about leadership, intersectionality and saving her Polynesian Island. Like *Mulan*, *Moana* is courageous, clever and sacrifices her soul to save her island. However, she still needs a male's assistance to achieve her goal. According to Tlonaen (2023), 'Moana looks positive about dealing with serious problems. She can make important decisions in solving problems. However, the success of her mission depends on a male partner!' Some critics consider *Moana* a setback. For Seybold, (2021), the prince is gone, yet Disney has replaced him with a domineering male character. Unfortunately, 'even though Disney appears to try to discard its traditions of producing androcentric fantasies, it continues to promote patriarchal notions of femininity and masculinity under the guise of female empowerment' (Seybold, 2021).

Unlike *Moana*, *Raya and The Last Dragon* is one of the animated films that elevates women with independent personalities since it is led by a group of women. *Raya* the main character, is described as courageous, intelligent and conscientious, her actions show a blend of masculinity and femininity. *Raya* is not a typical princess who wears a dress or fancy accessories and waits to be saved, instead she wears clothes like a knight. (Ambarwati, F. 2022; Wardah, and Kusuma, 2022). *Raya and The Last Dragon* focuses on sisterhood, intersectionality and diversity. To sum up: "the ideal princess and the newest generation of Disney princesses were viewed both as more progressive and as positive role models." (Zsubori, 2023).

3. Results and Findings

Disney's animated films are reflections of evolving societal beliefs and values. The female protagonists went through distinct eras from the Classics, Renaissance, to the New Age. In Disney's classic productions, women were stereotypically portrayed as passive and helplessly waiting for male's love and rescue which reinforced outdated societal norms. With the influence of the feminist movement and societal evolution, Disney challenged those stereotypes and began to portray independent and empowered female protagonists, celebrating diversity and inclusivity by depicting female characters from different races and body types such as *Pocahontas* and *Moana*. In Sojourner Truth's famous speech "Ain't I a Woman?," She challenged the



stereotypical portrayal of women's bodies as fragile by exemplifying her own physical strength. She highlighted that the problems faced by women of color were different from those faced by white women and emphasised that women of color as well deserve equal rights and dignity. (qtd. in Tong, and Botts, 2018)

The evolution of societal norms has had positive impacts on how recent Disney female characters have been portrayed. It helped to transform the portrayals of the classic princesses to modern and active female leads by awakening the societal consciousness and raising awareness. Although the transformation of Cinderella's passivity to Raya's courage is highly appreciated, Disney has been still promoting for perfect body features and beauty standards like Elsa. Fortunately, a positive shift can be noticed in Disney's modern female characters by balancing feminine and masculine traits, such as Merida, Elsa, Raya and Moana who display androgynous personalities.

4. Conclusion

Disney is one of the leading industries in the world. Its portrayal of the female characters in its animated films has been a subject of extensive analysis and criticism. This study aimed to identify the stereotypical portrayal of Disney's animated female characters and explore their progressive portrayals over the decades, especially regarding the beauty standards and gendered behavior. It also aimed to trace the evolution of the portrayals of classic female protagonists who often embody traditional feminine traits and Eurocentric beauty standards to the modern portrayals of the female protagonists in Disney's recent productions. The modern portrayals demonstrate less feminine traits and are progressing to be more androgynous and independent. Previous researchers acknowledged that the audience seeks a positive and empowering portrayals of women in the media as women represent half of the society and play vital roles in shaping generations. These positive portrayals contribute to breaking cultural norms and encouraging equal consideration for both genders. The depiction of objective media creates inclusive and enlightened societies.

In conclusion, the portrayal of female characters in Disney animated films has undergone through three stages; Classic, Renaissance and Modern. Consequently, the protagonists' depictions evolved from traditional stereotyped princesses to complex leads. However, the analysis of recent and new productions' representations is still not comprehensive, ongoing analysis of these representations is significant to overview the progress and understand its impact on societal perceptions of gender roles and femininity.



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