

# The Transition of Image-Portrayal in the Disney Princess Series Responding to Historical Background and Feminism Process

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**Abstract:** *The Disney Princess Series, as the first animated movies produced in the United States, have gained a global reputation that continues till now. The success lies in not only the creation of full-length feature films, but also a long-standing collection of Disney Princesses and their distinctive stories. The theme in every story reflect common values of the society; meanwhile, the audience can explore the historical feminist background of different period. The Series is more like an encyclopaedia of female images couple with cultural evolution. The images changing with self-betterment and the plots added to more meanings of social development, the Disney Princesses have assumed the responsibility to won the public hearts and educate the masses.*

**Keywords:** *Disney Princess Series, female images, historical feminist background*

## 1. Introduction

The Disney Princess Series are popular for more or less eighty years. Derived from various classical legends and tales, the Disney films center distinctive princesses as protagonists. The prototypes of the Disney Princess are basically characters in Grimm's Fairy Tales, Hans Christian Andersen's Fairytales and others written by Western authors. With combining new elements or creative points with the original forms, The Disney Princess Series not only attract audience by impressive story plots and romantic adventures, but also reflect social values of different eras in America.

Since the first movie therein came out in 1937, the Disney Princess Series have brought 14 princesses to life. They respectively have their own unique charm, family and social background, and thus correspondingly their stories are characterized by the time's mark. Just as a proverb goes, "see through the appearance to perceive the essence." Therefore, the historical facts can be analyzed by the Disney Princess Series; in particular, the women's changing status and their awakening self-awareness genuinely exert historical significance in the Series. Allan B. Chinen once stated that all fairy tales are essentially adult fairy tales, and what fairy tales include is not the psychological needs of children, but the psychological metaphors of adult society. In other words, the Disney Series' princess images are shaped in line with the common psychological requirements of adults for the type of characters; then they can be regarded as the products under contemporary social and cultural identity[1-2].

## 2. The Whole Evolution of Disney Princess Image-building

The following elaborates three representative images owing to historical facts in different periods of time, and during each period, several Disney princesses would be labeled with similar features and meaning.

### 2.1. The Delicate and Submissive Image of the Disney Princess from the 1930s to the 1960s

The first Disney Princess movie entered into public vision in 1937 — Snow White. Snow White is shaped as the most innocent, warm-hearted and beautiful woman with black hair, rosy skin and big bright eyes like black pearls. Snow White seems to sympathize everything pathetic and believe whoever she can meet. In her spiritual world, there is only kindness and beauty, no evil or lies; thus as her stepmother torments her again and again, and then even drugs her in a coma through a poison apple, she has no awareness of necessary resistance or self-protection. Adorable is her fixed label, so a prince awakens her with a kiss. Snow White's choice throughout the whole plot is staying, waiting and accepting. Indeed,

there is no standard or social code to evaluate her deeds and deny the correctness of her style of behaviour. However, since a princess actually represents the outstanding archetype among all the ladies, it obviously reflects a kind of stereotype of women's image — a delicate, compromised and submissive figure. Besides, A Cinderella Story and Sleeping Beauty are directed later in the similar manner; that is, princesses hold the passive fate of being survived by princes. The Disney princess is considered as a symbol of beauty, rather than strength, independence, or excellence, and is like a vase: pretty but delicate, while a prince appears hero-like man, responsible for rescuing one helpless princess. Once a woman hold the willing to compete with others, like a queen jealous of the princess, she is depicted as the evil and wicked, which demonstrates that women should not perform as ambitiously as men in America at that time. The contrast is so fresh that we can perceive women's low status and less working identity.

In fact, the underlying reasons for the Disney Princess's image is based on the historical background. In the Victorian era, women had a separate sphere: they were morally superior to men and their education was restricted by the patriarchal society. Women only should keep innocent and selfless to take care of their family without any mind or will of their own. It was the moral code in the father-dominating society that had embedded deeply in American culture. From 1930s-1960s, America just went through the Economic depression, the public needed such a warm and relaxing movie catering American people's value and favor. Then the Disney Princess came out. In the American environment of few feminine elements, the long-time tradition and recognition of patriarchy society had been rooted in everyone's mind. Therefore, although feminism movement emerged, it was difficult to switch the thought of women's power. Even the social media, newspapers published some sayings to consolidate the old ideology, which further obstructed the realization of women's equal and independent position. For instance, one passage in *Housekeeping Monthly* (1955) intended for high school girls, teaching them how to prepare for married life.

*Have dinner ready: Plan ahead, even the night before, to have a delicious meal — on time. This is a way of letting him know that you have been thinking about him, and are concerned about his needs. Most men are hungry when they come home and the prospects of a good meal are part of the warm welcome needed.*

*Prepare yourself: Take 15 minutes to rest so you will be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your makeup, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people. Be a little gay and a little more interesting. His boring day may need a lift.*

*Listen to him: You may have a dozen things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first.*

*Make the evening his: Never complain if he does not take you out to dinner or to other places of entertainment; instead, try to understand his world of strain and pressure, his need to be home and relax.*

*The goal: Try to make your home a place of peace and order where your husband can relax.*

Especially, during the period, the Second World War broke out in 1939; it just ended until 1945. Thereafter, the American government denoted that Consumerism culture was the force to prosper America. Since then, the division of social distribution had become definite — men worked for making a living, while women for caring children and family. Furthermore, A Cinderella Story conformed to the common culture about lifestyle in order to gain the audience's approval. In other words, the image of the Disney Princess was dominated by men and met men's expectation.

For these 30 years, owing to deep-seated sexual prejudice, the aftermaths of Economic Depression and the Second World War, feminism movement did not rise genuinely so that women were biased "normally" by social opinion. The consciousness of women had not awakened in a very real sense and women still were restrained and remained submissive to husbands or masculine powers. As a result, those three movie mentioned above in the Disney Princess Series displayed the Disney Princess' delicacy, weak and incapacity only with perfect appearance[3-5].

## **2.2. The Emerging Self-Willing of the Polyethnic Disney Princess from the 1980s to the 1990s**

As the Disney Princess had declined market after the release of A Cinderella Story and Sleeping Beauty, the Walt Disney Company halted for 30 years until 1989 when *The Little Mermaid* was born. In the film, the protagonist, Ariel holds enough courage to pursue her love and dream life, instead of waiting for a princess passively. It is a new kind of princess that gets more power and self-value of struggle, which is adapted from *Daughter of the Sea* in Andersen's Fairy Tales. *Beauty and the Beast* in 1991 has a similar image of Disney Princess, Belle, as that of Ariel. She is obsessed with acquiring new knowledge. Though her appearance is outstanding as well, her spirit of adventure and piety are the highlights of her soul. The year 1992 is a turning point, since the first non-white Disney Princess was created in the Disney Princess Series. Princess Molly is not the central character in the film, but still shows her charm and

distinctive beauty. The audience can witness her willing to genuine freedom and love through some plots of resistance. Thereafter, another non-white Indian Princess appeared in 1995. Pocahontas' rebellious attitude towards injustice and tradition is more obvious and become the main theme. She refuses the arranged marriage, because she falls in love with a white-skinned explorer. Her advance smooths out the dispute between the white race and the locals. The pursuit of love and ambition are both embodied in Pocahontas. It is a breakthrough of the Disney Princess that not only lies in the skin color or ethnicity of princesses, but also attributes to their aspiration, spirit and success in undertakings echoed by their stories.

According to the transformation of the Disney Princess' image, the internal causation is based on the historical events and ideological progress. At that time around 1980s, the American society was affected significantly by feminism movement lasting for more than 50 years. In details, the second wave of feminism in the United States emerged in the early 1960s, also known as "Women's Liberation Movement." Betty Friedan pointed out in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963): Women were tripped into the trouble of being a nobody, even though they had conformed to the standard of "ideal woman", including carefully playing roles of good wife and good mother; however, it is urgent to call on women to go out of house and change the selfless lifestyle so that women can improve and utilize their intelligence and capacity as well. This book was the pioneer of the feminism movement in 20 century. Sequentially, American women held mass demonstrations in 40 cities on the 50th anniversary of women's suffrage in 1970. The influence was so strong that it almost raised all American women's awareness of gender oppression and their view of personal experience as a political issue. Therefore, the independent gender consciousness of American women had been greatly enhanced and women's social status had also been greatly improved.

It is the successful development of feminism that transforms the image of the Disney Princess. The Series exposes the willing of princesses from the 1980s to the 1990s: Ariel's yearn for landing, Belle's desire for knowledge, Molly's willing to freedom and Pocahontas' determination to peace and happiness. The typical transformation can be found in *The Beauty and the Beast*. Education, one of the exclusive rights for men in that era, is what Belle fights for, which thus weights her as the first real feminist in the Disney Princess Series.

What' more, the movement for Political Correctness supported vulnerable groups and ethnic minorities in the 1980s; that is, women and non-white races garnered their deserved dignity and equality. The series follows the appeal and offers the position of the Disney Princess to Arabian and Indian woman. The progressive thought embeds more meaning of historical enlightenment and revolutionary spirit into the Series. At the same time, the promising future of the Disney Princess gives way to the flame of hope ignited in heart of audience.

### ***2.3. The Independent Self-Value Fulfillment in the Disney Princess since the Late 20th Century***

In 1998, Hua Mulan allowed feminism to reach its peak. Hua Mulan's fulfillment of self-value expresses women's voice of struggle and resistance. Not only does she possess the true heroic aura that even some men do not have, but also her intelligence and bravery win over others'. Taking her father's place in the conscription army, in essence, signifies the reaction against patriarchal tradition and the image of independent women. As residents drop upon their knees for gratitude and the emperor bows solemnly to her, she shines the female glory. The independent character is forged, while women's fetters are shattered. It is the era that exists for female advance.

After stepping into the new century, women have almost had the same rights and opportunities as men, and the female consciousness in the Disney Princess Series have also been further awakened. They are no longer appendages of men and no longer eager to please a patriarchal society. They endeavor to get rid of the shackles of the patriarchal society, have good commands of certain skills and obtain the sense of self-value. For example, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) depicts that Tiana works hard and saves money to open her own restaurant; accidentally, she meets a frog, Prince Naveen, and they go through amazing adventures with love cultivated; finally, Tiana becomes the first black-skinned Disney Princess. Her personal efforts and perseverance are the reason for ending up as the Disney Princess. This progress reflected in the movie means the complete victory of feminism, in particular, for women with black beauty. Similarly, Rapunzel in *Tangled* (2010) and Merida in *Brave* (2012) are firm in their choices and stick to the true self-value. *Frozen* (2013) brings two princesses, while the prince therein becomes a villain. The same as the previous films' endings, the Disney Princesses save themselves and the common people. *Moana* (2016) rather portrays a princess who does not need love or prince, but just holds the faith. In general, love is not the only destination for the Disney Princess anymore; instead, women soldier on the road to self-value by unleashing maximum power and performing wonders. The Disney Princess Series of this period have completed the transformation of image, from relying on the prince to the independent consciousness of modern women, the fulfillment of self-value.

The complete transformation of image is contributed by the third wave of feminism in the United States. At the late twenty century, modern women occupied status in the society at a certain degree; meanwhile, liberal ideas spread throughout the whole country and the Industrial Revolution further developed. All these typical events could account for the enlightened female awareness of self-value and self-achievement. Women participated in policy-making. Women engaged actively in many fields. Women worked diligently for self-pleasure. In other words, women ultimately won the access to self-actualization according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954). This was a dramatic breakthrough made by women themselves[7-8].

### 3. Conclusions

Movie, as a creation for culture, is correlated with social ideology. Motivated by social trend, movie follows the step of the public with the purpose of appealing to public emotion or obtaining mass recognition. So do the Disney Princess Series. This is why it becomes more and more popular and meaningful. In a word, there is an internal association that links movies and social ideology, so when people's thoughts are in flux, movie will be adjusted smoothly. The two are complementary and can be replenished each other perfectly.

The Disney Princess Series are like the barometer of popular culture, as it have recorded the social changes. The classic cartoon theme and the evolution of the princess' image reveal the change of American women's status and the development of feminist movement. In other words, the development of the Series is mainly reflected by the transformation of the Disney Princess' image. On behalf of the American women at a certain period, the Disney Princess has witnessed the awakening enlightenment of American women and the formation of progressive thoughts, particularly about equality and a full-fledged democracy. As a result, the remarkable historical feminist revolution exert a significant impact on the image of the Disney princess.

In return, as an important carrier of cultural transmission, animated films influence the development of ideas and spiritual entertainment of young people all over the world. For instance, the Series boosted feminism and spread ideas to the mass quickly and unconsciously. The image of the Disney Princess have gone from being passive and vulnerable at the beginning, to having the spirit of resistance, and now to the emerging modern women who are independent. Feminism movement not only transformed women's mindset, but also made a qualitative leap in public opinion. Thus the image of women is constantly improved so that more viewers can see the reality of the awakening of female consciousness, and thus pay more attention to the social status of female groups. However, not only in animated films, but also in styled film or TV platforms, feminism is the staff of all people, and the female group is an indispensable central force. Films reinvigorate women's persuasive force, while feminist also give a way to prosper movies' culture. To be sure, the culture of movies will embed more energy in human and bloom in all themes to educate the public. More importantly, it is a way to maintain the significance of historical facts with giving voice to the community.

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