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Critiquing Mouse House: An Analysis of Body, Gender and Culture in Select Disney Movies

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Abstract

The 'Disney princesses' brought forth by Walt Disney productions after the mid-90s introduced heroines of colour who are representatives of various ethnic communities around the world. However, these heroines who apparently appear to be a part of an indigenous community were mere extensions of the predominant white heroines. The aim of this paper is to identify the somatic construction of the ethnic heroines portrayed in the movies *Aladdin* and *Mulan* to explore their visualization and conception from a multicultural perspective. It also aims to examine the effect of such stereotypical constructions on child schema, when body is identified from the lens of the dominant western group. Both these heroines were created during the epoch of 'Disney Renaissance', the period in which Disney claims to introduce heroines from various indigenous communities around the world. However, a critical approach to these movies unveils that instead of presenting a holistic worldview on ethnic heroines, Disney promotes an essentialist approach, doing nothing more than providing unnecessary emphasis on physical beauty and glamour.

Keywords: Disney, ethnicity, gender, hegemony, performativity, stereotypes

Introduction

Disney, the largest conglomerate of animated movies is a magnificent realm that functions for the pleasure of children, creating a world of fantasy and wonder. In the words of Henry A. Giroux, Disney is a world of "ideologically loaded fantasies" that serves to create a visual "fidelity to real life" all while retaining the "magic of animation." (qtd. in Cheu 26) In the wake of multiculturalism, the idea of a pan European insignia prompted Disney to look for alternate female portrayals that

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visualised princesses from other ethnic backgrounds. The attempt to create diverse heroines resulted in Disney turning to legends and myths from other parts of the world. The effects of these notions culminated in 'Disney Renaissance' that diversified the franchise of Disney giving it a global outlook. This research paper aims to examine the female bodies pictured in the renaissance movies *Aladdin* and *Mulan* and how they contribute to the phenomenon of sex typing in children. The corporeal image of these princesses, when subjected to close scrutiny, reveals that they were pre-existing white bodies that underwent peripheral changes in order to cater to the needs of a larger audience.

The Legacy of Caricatured Bodies

Aladdin, released in 1992, was the fourth animated feature film of Disney and the first movie that represented 'Disney Renaissance'. Inspired by the legendary folktales of *Arabian Nights*, the movie tells the story of Aladdin, the boy who went from rags to riches with the help of his magic lamp. With *Aladdin*, Disney experimented with a revolutionary idea of incorporating racial diversity to their princess franchise and thus created Jasmine-The first non-European princess of Disney. Jasmine was modelled on Badrulbadar, the princess who frequently appears in the *Arabian Nights* folktale. Unlike the other Disney heroines, Jasmine remained a subservient character in her own film, taking an archetypal role of a mere love interest to Aladdin. Jasmine's representation in the movie, especially owing to her bodily construction needs to be addressed for she has, in many ways, departed from the traditional Arab princesses.

Celeste Lacroix in his study of ethnic princesses pinpoints that "there appears here…. to be an increasing focus on the body in the characters of colour. Whereas the costuming of these characters reflects the stereotypical images of each woman's ethnicity, the overall effect….works to associate the woman of colour with the exotic and sexual" (qtd. in Cheu 92). In *Aladdin*, the female protagonist Jasmine who symbolises the Arab world is shown with narrow face and tiny waist which opposes the Arab culture who have a more accepting philosophy on body shape (Cheu 92). Arabs who prefer body weight around the middle consider the midrange of fatness as the most socially acceptable body size, while lean or obese bodies were less preferred (Khalaf et al. 2). Jasmine's body and her facial features are indicative of her difference and ethnicity which are predetermined by the hegemony of west (Cheu 90). Critics have also pointed out that Disney has failed to understand the internal workings of Asian culture in which each country has its own styles of clothing and traditions which set them apart from other countries. The attire worn by Jasmine which reveals her midriff and belly button is a stark contrast to Arab grooming for Arabian princesses of those times never wore revealing dresses. Roger Ebert who criticised the film's projection of ethnic stereotypes writes, "Most of the Arab characters have exaggerated facial characteristics- hooked noses, glowering brows, thick lips- but Aladdin and the princess look like American teenagers" (Web.).

What is more perplexing is the dubious legacy of Aladdin in which the contemporary evidences suggest that the original story of Aladdin was not set in the Arab world, but in China. But this does not give Disney the prerogative to frame Jasmine through a colonial perspective (Romano, Web.).The agenda to exoticise the ethnic group poses a grave threat to the unique cultural temperament of other nations. To create a character based on legends is always a stifling issue for it is a gnawing task to trace the origins of a legend that continuously tends to change over time.

In 1998, Disney introduced its first Chinese heroine 'Mulan', based on the folktale of Hua Mulan: A popular mythical heroine of Chinese legends. In the Chinese version, young Mulan joins the armed force in the guise of a man, to save her ailing father from conscription. Though, Disney's Mulan maintains "certain distinctive Chinese cultural traits" to retain its native background, the plot of the movie revolves around a strictly Americanised thought process (Cheu 115). In the poem, Mulan disguises and joins the force with the support of her parents, while the film portrays Mulan leaving her home in search of her own identity (Cheu 115). The creators of the movie claim Mulan as highly different from the previous heroines on the grounds that instead of changing herself, Mulan changes the world around her (Toni Bancroft web.). This is ironical to an extent as Mulan herself undergoes a series of disguises to put up with the circumstances in which she is trapped. In the beginning, the story of a woman becoming a warrior to protect her family and nation gives a progressive, feminist message, but Mulan's bodily transformation corroborates the patriarchal power structures rather than confronting the established gender roles (Cheu 115). Although she succeeds in her mission, she returns to her old place as the same old girl from where she had begun. Though the movie claims to feature a girl with a sheer presence of mind, the discrepancies portrayed at the onset make it easier to locate the misrepresentations in it. The depiction of Mulan's body is highly conflicting for it is ambiguous regarding its social framework especially when body is perceived from a private domain of experience.

Mulan never questions the established codes of gender that designates specific roles along with distinct behavioural norms to both men and women. Rather than transcending the bifurcating lines of gender, Disney's *Mulan* continually separates men and women through "axiomatic" conceptions of what it means to be a male and female (Cheu 116). It is evident that Mulan's dusky skin tone and slant eyed face perpetuate ambiguous and misleading conceptions on ethnic bodies. In the movie, Mulan undergoes a makeover which symbolically transforms her from a girl to a man when she cuts her hair and wears the traditional male attire to join the imperial army (James 99). Here Mulan's act of styling her hair and tying up into a knot qualifies her to appear as a male warrior. Her physique hinges on the unquestioned assumption that all Chinese people look alike, no matter what their gender is (Klein 55).

Not Surprisingly, Disney's representation of the indigenous other created widespread resentment and dissatisfaction among the native audience. Clearly, Disney's take on the indigenous other, is exotic and romanticised that neither provides an accurate depiction of its historical reality nor the cultural instincts associated with it. The inclusion of ethnic features in the movies were highly selective; while some are presented, the others were simply repelled (Cheu 30). However the major accusation faced by Disney was the projection of its own culture as dominant and hegemonic. Hence the other cultures were viewed from the point of view of the creator (Cheu 30). This led to inaccurate and stereotypical images that reduced the ethnic princesses into shady imposters of the classic princesses. Their bodies adorned with seemingly different costumes were relegated to an *affiche* meant to display the dominant beauty codes. This reflects the predominant social constructions of race, gender and ethnicity that depict its representation through a white male perspective (Cheu 67). Ultimately it results in the centering of patriarchal norms, normalising heterosexuality and privileging whiteness (Cheu 67).

In the movie, Mulan is frequently told how she should behave and look like and is carefully moulded into it (Cheu 117). She continually resists the makeover prescribed by the matchmaker and never succumbs to the role of a bride. She is taunted by costumers and hairdressers and made to feel pained and uncomfortable in her own body (Cheu 117). Every trait including her tiny waist serves to integrate her into the heterosexual matrix by which her identity as a woman is recognised and accepted. Clearly the film relies on the performativity of gender and even though Mulan questions her identity she finds herself unable to free herself from the performative aspects that gender forces upon her. As Judith Butler puts it, "Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint…. to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds." (531)

The producers of the movie have even confessed that there has been a deliberate infusion of Christian values despite the character's ethnic identity which has no connections with western religious discourses. This instates the character of Mulan structured on western patterns which makes the character appear too foreign in the eyes of the natives. Here notions of realism are a slippery aspect that serves to establish the features of a dominant group (James 75). This kind of grouping is fraught with problems as it overlooks the individual bodies. Here the autonomy of body is at stake for the bodies of these heroines are never freed from social and cultural attributes. Instead, they are forced to fit into the square hole of a dominant western enterprise that reinforces Anglo-centric notions of corporeality. Body should be perceived as an expression of our subjectivity and physical self: its beauty, abilities and capacities as a source of pleasure. However, body is often considered as a site where culture and tradition are experimented, transmuted and projected (Perez 30).

Contrary to female corporeality, the male experiences physicality and awareness of his body. Mulan is constantly reminded that she is not supposed to use her body for her own sake for it gains value only by its attractiveness to her prospective groom (Cheu 120). The significant aspect that Mulan fails to surpass in this context is her attempt to claim her bodily power. It seems that her power inheres in her blurred gender which imposes the rules for femaleness.

Theorising Bodies

Academic interest in body and its sociology has grown substantially in recent years, yet understandings of the body continue to be marked by uncertainties (James 22). Bodies are shaped by the world we live in, which makes them undeniably and indisputably political (James 26). The first cognitive theory on gender was developed by Kohlberg in the year 1966. His theory encapsulates the role of gender in child development and how their understandings on gender influence their behaviour. Although Bem's theory on gender schema is closely related to Kohlberg's in gender development, the theory proposed by Bem provides a more concrete understanding of gender and its influence on child schema. Further research in this field, shows that gender stereotyping follows a specific developmental pattern which can be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase occurs mainly during the infant and preschool age where children begin to learn about gender related traits (Marin and Ruble 68). In the second phase, the acquired gender knowledge is cemented either by rigidity or fashion (Marin and Ruble 68). Thirdly, a phase of relative flexibility comes along with the acquired rigidity (Marin and Ruble 68). Hence one can perceive gender as an emergent idea of social structures, both as a method and result of legitimising the social divisions of society (West and Zimmerman 127).

One of the most prominent uses of gender schema theory is in the field of cultural studies where it is used for the mapping of stereotyped images and historically marginalised populations (Starr and Zurbriggen). Gender schema theory begins with the observation that the developing child learns the appropriate repertoire from his/her cultural environment (1981: 355). In the words of Bem:

> a schema is a cognitive structure that organizes and guides an individual's perception…. Gender schema construes perception as a constructive process… that prompts a child to regulate his or her behaviour so that it conforms to the culture's definitions of maleness and femaleness (1981: 355).

In psychology, the process of acquiring sex appropriate personality, behaviour and self-concepts is referred to as 'sex-typing'. Sex typed individuals differ from other individuals not in terms of their masculinity or femininity, but in terms of their self - concepts and behaviour that are organised on the basis of their gender (356). Feminist scholars often argue that children become sex-typed because sex happens to be

the basis of socialisation in their culture. Bem's article "Gender Schema Theory and its Implications for Child Development" that introduces gender schema theory to feminist scholars, reinstates that cultural dogmas often treat the child as a passive receiver of social values rather than as an active agent trying to understand and appreciate the world (1983: 600). According to Bem, "gender schema theory is a theory of process, not content …. The process of dividing the world into masculine and feminine on the basis of meanings that a particular culture provides is central to the theory" (1983: 605). Thus Gender schema theory insists that children are less likely to become sex typed if the society limits its cognitive network related to sex and tempers its persuasion on gender dichotomy (1983: 609). In her research, Bem attempts to attenuate possible sex linked correlations by working on the illustration of children's picture books by drawing long hair onto male characters and avoiding pronouns that implied gender (1983: 611). Gender schema theory is proposed with the intention that human behaviour and perceptions should be devoid of gender and one should not drag gender onto unnecessary situations (Bem, "Gender Schema Theory: A Cognitive Account of Sex Typing" 1981: 363). Our masculinity and femininity are self- evident and rarely would we be prompted to assert it. The unnecessary constraints of gender on an individual's behaviour should be eliminated (Bem 1981: 363).

Sex stereotypes influence a child's perceptions and behavioural patterns in unimaginable ways and once they get into their cognitive construct, their thought process and behaviour are automatically reduced to sex defined ways of operating (Martin and Diana 1126). In "Intertextuality and the Child Reader", Christine Wilkie Stibbs points out that children are powerless recipients of what adults choose to write for them and children's literature an intertextual subgenre of adult literature (qtd. in Hunt 169). The pejorative social conceptions on body, often determined by age and gender, impinge on the emotional and psychological constitution of a child, who is not only building their intellectual abilities but also busily assimilating sex roles and concepts (Yawkey and Yawkey 545).

With reference to the studies made on the Disney movies mentioned above, and taking into account the theory used for substantiation, it can be hypothesized that these female heroines who sought to represent different cultures underwent queer recorrections that serve the interests of the dominant groups which make them totally disparaging to their own culture. The makers of the movie have unwittingly produced tailor-made heroines that neither present the lived bodily experiences nor the perceived cultural meanings inscribed onto their body. These customized women models that satisfy the whims and fancies of the preeminent group give a sense that body is an 'object of desire' as one observes a female body through fetishized lens (Garcia 125). The failure of their bodies to define their self and the inability to fall into place, in effect, reflects the acceptance of prejudiced bodies which are neither questioned nor deconstructed, but simply acquiesced out of Anglo-centric racial

superiority. Such representations reflect the interests of the dominant sector that imposes a dominant ideology, based on pejorative stereotypes, which in turn, manifest the construction of ethnic bodies as the absolute 'Other'. The specificity of these heroines' bodies lies in the fact that their bodies are not constituted as 'other' through mere subjugation. The way they are depicted as 'other', happens through objectification.

This has serious repercussions on developing children who are busy accumulating sex roles and concepts. In the words of Carol Vance:

> Sex is a social construction articulated at many points through the economic, social and political structures of the material world. A woman's body is viewed as being sensuous, mysterious and exotic… always the desirable other represented in advertisements, women's magazines, on the catwalk, in popular cinema and so on (qtd. in Gopal and Sabala 46).

Diversifying Disney

Animated movies are endowed with expressive powers that make to our aesthetic development (qtd. in Hunt 8). Hence they are an excellent medium to enculturate children with open attitude towards gender, identity and expression. Despite the changes made by Disney on portrayal of women from a 'damsel in distress' to a saviour by herself, Disney still has a long way to go, for it still relies on the age old convention that 'you are how you look'. Consequently young girls are urged to follow the path of "desired femininity as opposed to bad femininity: femininity gone wrong, femininity oversexualized" (qtd. in Hu). In the words of Laura Mulvey, "In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" ("Visual Pleasure" 62).

Conclusion

To conclude, Disney entertainment is one of the biggest conglomerates of popular culture and exerts a great influence on children. With their effective storyboard and remarkable animation technology, Disney has succeeded in exalting their audience to a state of awe and wonder. As Henry Giroux indicates, "The boundaries between entertainment, education and commercialisation collapse through Disney's sheer reach into everyday life" (qtd. in Cheu 221)

The princesses of colour, who are highly different from their classic sisters (Laemle 7) are encumbered by their ethnicity that globalises their body politics (Wild 11). Since these heroines are produced in a political climate where cross cultural relations were a stifling issue, movies tend to negotiate their ideas on indigenous and non-indigenous. In this context, body is presented in a state of instability, picking up on features and attributes that are unusual. The result is a technologised body

that receives a form and shape through strategic selection, presumably confirmed by an Anglo centric or male viewpoint (James 120). The newly formed body contains a hybrid physique that can neither be separated nor be fused into a new homogenous self (Wild and Naguschewski 38). By constructing an ambiguous body that comprises of all the ethnic features at its crust but obstinately remains western at its core, children are forced to foresee their bodies as always in need of correction.

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