The Construction of Family in Selected Disney Animated Films

Belinda Marie Balraj
Kupusamy Gopal
University Pertahanan National
Malaysia.

Abstract

Family plays an important role in most Disney animated films, be it the nuclear family, extended family or step family. Though Disney has received numerous backlash regarding stereotyping and racism, the scope is family is always seen as something that needs to be valued and cherished. The construction of family in Disney films is the same in most films whereby the role of the mother is nonexistent and the main character is usually portrayed as not having any siblings. Keeping this in mind, this study looks at how family members are portrayed in the selected Disney animated films specifically The Little Mermaid, The Princess and the Frog, Snow White and Beauty and the Beast, Mulan and Pocahontas.

Key Words: Disney films, Family, Construction, Media**.**

Introduction

According to Craven (2002), for centuries children have learnt the meaning of family and feminist roles in fairy tales. Hecht (2011) states that research have shown that fairy tales may help to shape a child's view of the world. These stereotyped roles of man and woman and conservative ways of thinking about the family system are taught to children when they are most impressionable (Fisher & Silber, 2000). Children learn about the construction of family from Disney fairy tales and this leaves an impression on them on how families should be; who is the wicked witch or the loving King.

Women in fairy tales are characterized as either good or bad. In most fairy tales, when a mother is good, she is either portrayed as dead or does not play a significant role. On the other hand, if the mother is portrayed as evil, her role is further enhanced to make every character's life a living hell.

Men on the other hand are portrayed as someone good, no matter what they do (Hecht, 2011). Women are never seen in the same standards as man and women could never do what men do, and would not be mistaken for the other. The moral at the end of the story tells the audience that a happy ending means a woman has to be passive, victimized, asleep or destroyed (Dworkin, 1974).

In their study of Disney films, Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman and Lund (2003) found that family relationships were a strong priority, the diversity of families was simplified, mothers were marginalized, and fathers were elevated. Disney films included two parent, single parent, and step parents families; however, children in gay, lesbian or transgender families were not represented (Hecht, 2011).

The purpose of this research therefore is to examine how a family is constructed in selected Disney films specifically in The Little Mermaid, The Princess and the Frog, Snow White, Beauty and the Beast, Mulan and Pocahontas. This study focused on the role of women specifically as women are stereotyped as docile and unable to make decisions in most Disney films. Although reasonable research has been done on themes on femininity and masculinity, little research has been conducted on family roles (Hecht, 2011).

Media and Stereotyping

Viewers organize knowledge about the world around them by sorting and simplifying received information via the media. Viewers therefore create certain representations of the reality which in return have a significant influence on social cognition - understanding, anticipation and emotion control.

Media has a specific and measurable influence on a viewer's conceptions of reality (Hecht, 2011). The time a person spends in front of the television; their ideas, information and consciousness are stereotyped by the perception given by the media.

Likewise, the more media are consumed, the more their perceptions are 'mainstreamed' (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980). Wilson (2008) found that children under the age of six spend so much time in front of the television rather than playing outdoors, meaning that social experiences are no longer face to face. Children tend to believe the story depicted in the fairy tales are the real story rather than seeing what is around them as reality.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory by Gerbner & Gross (1976) notes that the basic assumption underlying the cultivation or enculturation approach is that "repeated exposures to consistent media portrayals and themes will influence our perceptions of these items in the direction of the media portrayals" (Wimmer& Dominick, 1997:88). This approach suggest that media consumption 'cultivates' in us a distorted perception of the world we live in, making it seem more like television portrays it, than it is in real life (Bittner, 1989). Some early research studies indicated that media portrayals of certain topics could have an impact on audience perceptions, particularly if the media were the main information sources (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997).

The media is able to blur reality and fantasy, making viewers believe what is not true. The basic hypothesis of cultivation analysis is that the more time one spends living in the world of media, the more likely one is to report conceptions of social reality that can be traced to television portrayals (Gross & Morgan, 1985). "When the media reinforce what is seen in real life, thus giving an audience member a 'double dose', the resulting increase in the cultivation effect is attributed to resonance". (Wimmer& Dominick, 1997:89) The difference in perceptions of reality is usually caused by demographic and social factors which are offset by heavy viewing, resulting in a common view point. One only need to check newspaper headlines to see evidence of this theory in action, as children have harmed and in some instances killed other children by replicating what they have seen on the television believing that they will spring back to action unharmed (Ivy & Backlund,2007).

The Construction of Family in Disney Animated Films

Single Parent

The Little Mermaid

Single parents are a common theme in the Disney films. A study by DiPirro (2007) found that 63% of princesses had fathers and only 25% had mothers. In the film The Little Mermaid, King Triton is portrayed as a single parent after the death of his wife Queen Athena. Though Ariel had the undivided attention of her father apart from her six sisters, she is still portrayed as rebellious and always out for adventure with her best friends Sebastian and Flounder.King Triton is portrayed as someone helpless in protecting his daughter and was no match for the female fatale Ursula (Rozario, 2004). King Triton may be portrayed as the ruler but when it came to decisions making for Ariel, he is seen as being helpless and not in control of the situation. King Triton is not able to overcome the female fatale Ursula when Ariel is cursed and loses her voice. Ariel is let to wander herself and frequently disobeys her father's orders, causing conflicts between King Triton and her.

Snow White

The beautiful Snow White is also portrayed in a single parent family, but unlike Ariel, Snow White has an evil stepmother who despises the very beautiful Snow White. Snow White is also seen as the only child in the family something that is repetitive in most Disney films. The King here is portrayed as someone submissive and has no real role in this Disney film. The evil Queen is in control of the kingdom, the guards and its citizens. Due to her beauty, the evil Queen drives Snow White out of the castle who in return takes refuge in the house of the seven dwarfs and is stereotyped into a typical housewife mode. She cooks and cleans for the dwarfs.The King plays a non-existence role in Snow White's life; its only when she is brought back to life by the handsome prince does the King exists.

Beauty and the Beast

Bella from Beauty and the Beast is also portrayed in a single parent family with her scientist's father. As with all other single family female lead characters, Bella is also seen as carefree and yearns from a better life amid her books and the dashing Gaston. Her mother is never mentioned in any part of the story line giving the impression that it is an accepted norm for the main characters to be without a the love of a mother.

Without the love and guidance from her mother, Bella is allowed to do what she pleases by her father so to not feel the emptiness of not having a mother. Unlike Ariel, Bella sets out to redeem her father from the Beast when he is caught trespassing in the Beast's palace. She puts the Beast in his place making sure that her needs are taken care of and that her voice is also heard.

Pocahontas

Pocahontas, a story based on an Indian princess who sacrifices her lover for the love for her people, is also portrayed in a single parent role. Her father Chief Powhatan is seen as the strong character in Pocahontas's life. Pocahontas does not have any evil stepmother but is seen in the company of the Grandmother Willow-a speaking tree as her guide and mother figure. Pocahontas is respected amongst her people, a free spirited princess who unlike Ariel, is able to differentiate between what is deemed important and not. With the guidance from Grandmother Willow and her father, Pocahontas goes back to her roots leaving the handsome John Smith to return to England.

Biological Parents

Mulan

FaMulan, is the only daughter of aged warrior Fa Zhou. She impersonates a man and takes her father's place during a general conscription to counter a fictitious Hun invasion led by Shan Yu. Along with her guardian dragon Mushu, her captain, Li Shang, a lucky cricket, "Cri-kee," and her companions, Yao, Ling, and Chien-Po, she battles the invading Hun army.Mulan is seen as a very steadfast character who realizes that her family honor and pride is very much an important aspect in the family. Mulan has the advantage a complete family with biological parents and extended families too. Her mother plays a significant role here and is seen is several scenes in the film. Mulan's father brings out the duty in her as a daughter whereas her mother teaches her the values of a woman. Mulan is seen as having a complete life and unlike other stereotyped female characters; she is able to hold her stand amongst her male warriors.

The Princess and the Frog

Tiana, a young African waiter dreams of owning culinary restaurant in New Orleans to fulfill the dreams of her late father, James. Tiana's mother Eudora plays a significant role in Tiana's life after the death of her father. Tiana's father instilled strong working ethics in Tiana while Eudora is seen as saying that girls should not have dreams which are not achievable. Eudora is seen as the passive character, a typical stereotype by Disney while the father though deceased is seen as an integral part of her life. Tiana sticks to her dream even after accidently turning into a frog and marries the man of her dreams.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion above, we can conclude that Disney has progressed in the way it portrays characters in its films. Comparing to Disney films in the 80's to current Disney films, we can see a progression in terms of gender portrayal and family representation. Characters with biological or single parents are portrayed differently at times in Disney films; some are left to roam aimlessly only learning their lesson at the end whilst some characters though playful and stubborn, see family values as more important than their love life.

References

Bittner, J. (1989): Language Arts & Disciplines. Prentice Hall.

Craven, A. (2002). Beauty and the Belles: Discourse of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland. European Journal of Women Studies, 9(2), 123-142.

DiPirro, D. (2007). From Bitting the Apple to Breaking the Spell: Analyzing love in the Disney Princess Collection. California State University, Fullerton.

Dworkin, A. (1974). WomenHating. New York:E.P Dutton.

Gerbner, G. & Gross, L. (1976).Living with television: The violenceprofile.Journal of Communication, 26, 76.

Ivy, D &Backlund, P.(2007).GenderSpeak: Personal Effectiveness in Gender Communication (4th Edition).

Rozario, C. (2004). The Princess and the Magic Kingdom.Beyond Nostalgia, the Function of the Disney Princess.Women's Studies in Communication, 27(1), 34.

Tanner, L ; Haddock, S &Zimmerman,T. (2003). Images of Couples and Families in Disney feature-length animated Films. The American Journal of Family Therapy, 31, 355-373.

Wimmer, Roger D &Joseph.R.Dominick (1997): Mass Media Research: An Introduction. Belmont, MA: Wadsworth