

# ISSUES OF CULTURAL DIVERSITIES IN DISNEY'S ANIMATED MOVIES

## Reflective Essay

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### INTRODUCTION

The movie “industry” nowadays is “more sensitive to issues of culture and gender than it once was”, however many pictures “still perpetuate common misconception about” cultural diversities. “Such oversimplified and inaccurate portrayals can profoundly affect how [people] perceive [each other] and how [people] value [themselves]” ([http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/movies/concerns/stereotyping\\_movies.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/movies/concerns/stereotyping_movies.cfm)., undated, no page).

It was Walt Disney, the person who created many famous classical stories in the 1940s and 1950s, such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella*, *Pinocio*, *Snow White*, *The Little Mermaid* and *Sleeping Beauty*. In fact, Disney's animated movies based on those classic stories are still popular at the moment, particularly among children around the world (Radio Suara Amerika, 2002, on line).

It cannot be ignored that the viewers who are watching classic animation movies, such as Disney's, are still “getting stereotypical messages” at the moment (Mifflin, 1999, p.E.8). “Animated [pictures] have their share of stereotypes, because they are familiar and easily understood ([http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/movies/concerns/stereotyping\\_movies.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/movies/concerns/stereotyping_movies.cfm)., undated, no page). However, it seemed that new versions of Disney's animated movies have tried to improve the use of stereotypes (Durbin, 1998, p.2.13).

In this essay, I would like to analyse some Disney's animated movies as the particular media genre which I chose to see how they reflect cultural diversities, such as gender and race.

### HOW ANIMATED MOVIES, AS MEDIA, WORK TO THE VIEWERS

People call media as “windows of the world”, though, in fact the system to show the view is not “simple” (Branston and Stafford, 2003, p.9). Animated movie is one of media technologies which is well-liked in recent century (Nava and Nava, 1996, p.505). As a kind of modern media, animation movies using multimethods such as motion pictures (with lines,

gesticulations, colours and shadings) also words and sounds in creating icons, experiences or situations (Branston and Stafford, 2003, p.9).

As technology, animated film “might be liberating” to permit the consumers giving “more” contribution in creation and “learn about the world”. However it could be “out of control, gendered, and not universally available and accessible, whether in terms of [social category] or [area]” (Branston and Stafford, 2003, p.422).

With help of technology, “visual” illustration schemes in animation movies are showing iconic signs which made artificial images are similar with the true ones. Technologies also supported creating indexical signs like a natural “kind of evidence” in the stories. With arbitrary signs, which are “verbal language”, also symbolic signs, which are used of visual signs, all of these signs are giving meaning “as well as words” (Branston and Stafford, 2003, p.17).

According to Walter Benjamin, modern product of movie, including animation show, would assist to expand in watchers sharper and decisive perception. As an artistic figure, movie was fashionable, egalitarian, also “potentially” innovatory (Nava and Nava, 1996, p.508). Therefore animation film could encourage social attitudes either obsolent stereotypes or objective ideas about a group of people. Characters in the stories might be being role models for the viewers. For instance, the fame of “the princess in Disney feature animation” creates image that she is “one of the best known models of [prestigious woman]” (Do Rozario, 2004, retrieved from ProQuest, no page).

## **GENDER STEREOTYPES IN DISNEY’S MOVIES**

Stereotype is defined by Merriam Webster as “a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment”. “Racial or ethnic stereotypes are labels or categories that people use to define or describe others” (<http://racerelations.about.com/od/stereotypes/>, 1995, no page).

Other defines stereotypes as “simple, one-dimensional portrayals of people, usually based on sex, race, religion, profession, or age”. ([http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/movies/concerns/stereotyping\\_movies.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/movies/concerns/stereotyping_movies.cfm)., undated, no page).

“Filmmakers often rely heavily on stereotypes, because they are a quick and simple way to establish a movie character’s traits” ([http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/movies/concerns/stereotyping\\_movies.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/movies/concerns/stereotyping_movies.cfm)., undated, no page).

Many characters in Disney's stories are based on binary oppositions, which defined by Levi-Strauss as grouping qualities into pair of opposites (Branston and Stafford, 2003, p.12). For case in point, it can be seen since the title *Beauty and the Beast* that this classic story is separating human appearance in opposite (Beauty and the Beast, 1991).

The story *Beauty and the Beast*, as well as many other fairy-tales, is signifying the opinion that the ideal concept of a woman is good-looking. Eventhough the main female character in this tale likes reading, which breaks the convensional custom of a feminine princess, however she is still definitely a pretty girl who could make the most handsome man in her village crazy about her (Beauty and the Beast, 1991).

The author of *The Frog of Princess*, Blount, told that "in traditional tales, the prince goes on a quest to win a princess, and [the readers or viewers] don't want [their] female characters going off on a quest for no other reason than to find a prince" (Mifflin, 1999, p.E.8). According to Ann W. Richards, the point in these stories is "that women get dressed up and look nice, and boys do brave, constructive, wonderful things" (Mifflin, 1999, p.E.8).

In *The Lion King*, for instance, the female lions are "weak and need a male hero". When the male hero, Simba, was not present, "the lionesses cannot protect themselves from the evil Scar and must wait for years until Simba, the main male character, returns [back] (<http://www2.gol.com/users/bobkeim/Disney/diswomen.html>), 1999, no page).

There was a try to make "a change" in the story *Beauty and the Beast*. On one side, the Beast in the convensional tale has terrifying appearance, however "he is really kind and gentle". On the other hand, in the new Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* animated picture, the Beast showed a high temper, even a "threat of physical violence is present". Here Belle's prettiness and "sweet nature" created his character transformation, "from a beast into a prince, from a cruel [one] into a kind [one]" (<http://www2.gol.com/users/bobkeim/Disney/diswomen.html>), 1999, no page).

However, the change of *Beauty and the Beast* narrative does not significantly improve the feminist side of the story. The message of the original tale is "that you should not judge someone by what they look like [since] an ugly outside can hide a loving heart. In the new version, there is a risky message that "if a young woman is [beautiful] and sweet-natured, she can change an abusive man into a [nice one], which also means that "it is a woman's fault if her man abuses her" (<http://www2.gol.com/users/bobkeim/Disney/diswomen.html>), 1999, no page).

There is also assumption that "if Belle lived in the real world, she would almost certainly become a battered wife". This "message is dangerous for young girls because it is not true" (<http://www2.gol.com/users/bobkeim/Disney/diswomen.html>), 1999, no page).

In *Mulan*, the female character seems as giving a feminist view by create a character of a warrior girl, Mulan. Nevertheless, it “fits the pattern of a young woman in love”. In fact, Mulan still an under-man-power girl. “The best thing that can happen to [Mulan] is to marry the hero and live *happily ever after*, just similar to other stories ending (<http://www2.gol.com/users/bobkeim/Disney/diswomen.html>), 1999, no page).

In addition, the kingdoms in Disney’s stories seem like a man’s world. Yet, Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario argued that this man’s world is dependent on the female character (Do Rozario, 2004, retrieved from ProQuest, no page).

“Disney’s artists have constructed a powerful critique of patriarchal discourse: the inefficacy of divine rights of kings is both drawn and storied in contrast to the potency of women’s evil and their dangerous and carnivorous threats to order” (Do Rozario, 2004, retrieved from ProQuest, no page).

In term of sex categories, Disney’s stories typically sort human in two kinds of sexes: male and female. In the stories I was observing recently: *Alice in Wonderland*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Pocahontas*, there is no transvestite neither homosexual character, particularly for the positive-image characters (*Alice in Wonderland*, 1991; *Beauty and the Beast*, 1995; *Pocahontas*, 1991). Conversely, in the movie *The Lion King*, the bad character, Scar, proposes homosexuality (<http://www2.gol.com/users/bobkeim/Disney/diswomen.html>), 1999, no page).

It can be assumed that Disney’s messages are still based on “conservative view” that “mainstream media” are supposed to articulate the strength of mind and wishes of the *normal people*, and must not “[symbolize] positively anything that does not [support] dominant ideology” (Doty and Gove, 1997, p.84). Therefore the Disney’s good characters are usually heterosexual and have no confusing sex (*Alice in Wonderland*, 1991; *Beauty and the Beast*, 1995; *Pocahontas*, 1991).

## **RACIAL ISSUES IN DISNEY’S ANIMATED MOVIES**

Overt racism, which gives explicit racist argument, in children movies, including Disney’s. However, some forms of inferential racism, what are defined as “apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as set of *unquestioned assumptions*”, can be seen in those pictures (Hall, 1996, p.162).

For instance, in the picture *Aladdin* which made in 1992, “the [wicked] characters, like Jafar, [seems] very Arabic”. Conversely, *Aladdin*, “the hero”, seems and “sounds”

similar to “a fresh-faced American boy”, white, and “he asks people to call him *Al*, an American name, not an Arabic name” (<http://www2.gol.com/users/bobkeim/Disney/diswomen.html>., 1999, no page). “The plot [also] carries negative stereotypes about [the women status and education] and the marriage arrangement in the Arabic region where the [movie] takes place” (<http://racerelements.about.com/od/stereotypes/>., 1995, no page).

Furthermore, in *the Lion King*, “the characters are animal, but their voices show racist stereotypes”. In this African setting story, the hero sound, Simba, is using “two white American actors” voices. On the other hand, the evil characters, the hyenas, “speak non-standard English and are played by [Afro-american] actors [such as] Whoopi Goldberg and Cheech Marin (<http://www2.gol.com/users/bobkeim/Disney/diswomen.html>., 1999, no page). It is even thought that this movie “didn’t fail to add small snippets of Christian propaganda (<http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/4885/disney.html>, undated, no page).

Later Disney was “interested in the idea that it is [positive] to include people from many different cultures” or “*multiculturalism*” and created *Pocahontas*, the animated film which is combined of Disney’s tale and “a real story from Native American history” (<http://www2.gol.com/users/bobkeim/Disney/diswomen.html>., 1999, no page; *Pocahontas*, 1995). The trouble is, the true story was different with the fictive one created by Disney. It is “worrying” as public supposed that “they were learning about history when they watched *Pocahontas*” (<http://www2.gol.com/users/bobkeim/Disney/diswomen.html>., 1999, no page). This movie “has a great deal to do with the political agenda issue” (<http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/4885/disney.html>, undated, no page).

## **COULD THESE ANIMATED MOVIES GIVE THE BEST REFLECT OF CULTURAL DIVERSITIES?**

In term of “semiotic”, media is both “reflection of the world” also “based in the intention of the [creator]” (Branston and Stafford, 2003, p.10). Therefore many gender biases and racialism in media, partially the Disney’s animated movies which recently being discussed about, are possibly reflection of the recent world. Since the world is always changing and improving, it is possible that the messages reflected would change too. The author’s objective is important to make a significant try in creating new paradigm of the stories.

According to Blount, “writing a feminist tale was more complicated than, say, replacing a white Cinderella with an Asian one” (Mifflin, 1999, p.E.8). It means improving

multicultural equality in Disney's stories is definitely potential. However, it is still not impossible at all to create a feminist view in Disney's pictures.

In my opinion, one example of the Disney's animated movie which is relatively free from gender stereotypes is *Alice in Wonderland*, since the main theme of this plots breaks many conventional pattern of the *normal* world. It does not matter whether Alice, the girl who becomes the main character, has either pretty or ugly appearance. It does not matter if, say, the other characters such as the white rabbit or the cat is male or female. (*Alice in Wonderland*, 1991).

In this *Alice in Wonderland* story there is a king who physically small and powerless as a partner of a huge-size, cruel and authoritarian queen, that smash the common concept that a (male) king usually strong and dominant while the (female) queen as his partner usually weak and soft. Unlike traditional tales, in this movie, there is no masculine prince acting as a hero rescuing Alice from crisis (*Alice in Wonderland*, 1991).

## CONCLUSION

As technology, animated movie affects all of the viewers, mainly "children" (Branston and Stafford, 2003, p.422). As a medium, these pictures could create all meanings belong to any cultural diversity, such as race and gender. It could be being "a [influential] source of ideas about race" also the "place where the [thoughts] are [expressed], worked on, [altered], and elaborated" (Hall, 1996, p.161).

Since kids "have a limited experience of the world, they are particularly vulnerable to being influenced by media stereotypes" ([http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/movies/concerns/stereotyping\\_movies.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/movies/concerns/stereotyping_movies.cfm)., undated, no page). Therefore creating new feminist twist and other cultural diversity reflection is necessary in improving Disney's classic animated movies. As Ann W. Richards said, "feminist infusions are still needed in children stories, including modern ones" (Mifflin, 1999, p.E.8). Though restoring feminist view in children tales is though as more difficult than improving multiculturalism (Blount in Mifflin, 1999, p.E.8), yet, both of them are needed and possibly done.

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