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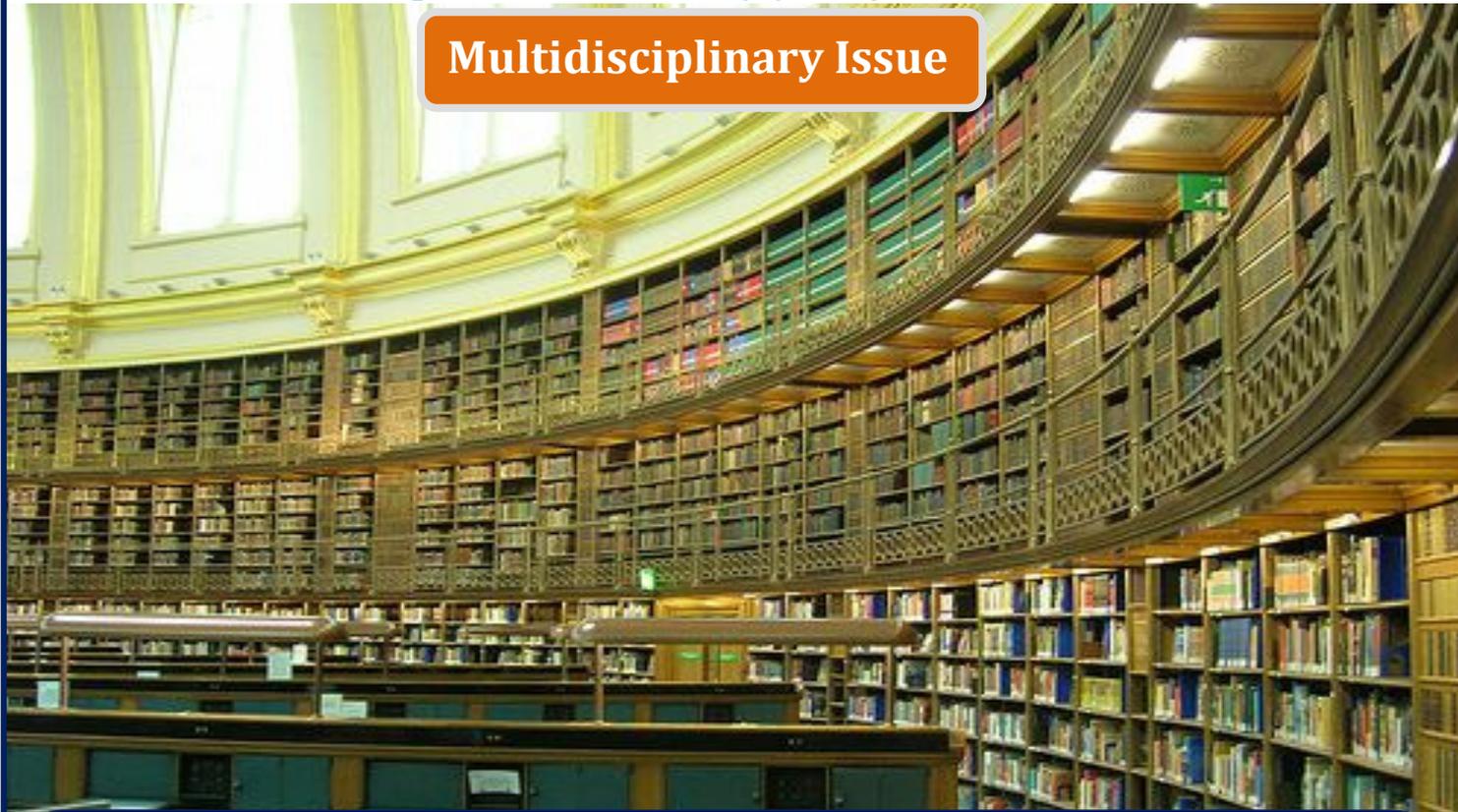
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Multidisciplinary Issue



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**- Chief & Executive Editor**

## **Breaking the Stereotype Trap in the Disney Princess Movie 'Brave'**

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&

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### **Abstract:**

*Exposure to media and films plays a pivotal role in moulding us. This is especially true in the case of children. Media and films act as learning tools for little girls and boys contributing to their self-image and ambition. Movies help them understand the society and the gender roles persistent in it.*

*The early Disney princess movies had a typical fairy tale theme presenting women as the weaker sex, the damsels in distress waiting to be rescued by their charming princes. These early princesses are women with unrealistic appearances and are surrounded by gendered objects like mirrors and beautiful dresses. Snow white, Cinderella, Aurora and even Belle are the perfect housewives with no ambition besides getting married. These movies convey the message that the only goal for women is to get married, making it the only way to achieve their "happily ever after". Even so Disney has evolved with time depicting some positive models in 'Pocahontas' (1995), 'Mulan' (1998), 'The Princess and the Frog' (2009) and 'Tangled' (2010). Though the intelligent princesses in these movies rebel and seek adventures, we still see them living in a man's world.*

*In the recent movies like 'Brave' (2012), 'Frozen' (2013) and 'Maleficent' (2014), Disney steers away from the traditional princess roles. This research paper aims to study how the movie 'Brave' shatters feminine stereotypes portraying a refreshing new woman of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The plot of the movie revolves around a complex mother-daughter relationship rather than a romance. Merida is a princess but a princess who does not need a prince. She is feisty, skilled and unruly like her flowing red hair. She is a powerful agent of her own destiny and worthy of feminist attention.*

**Keywords:** Stereotypes, Disney movies, gender roles.

In every culture across the globe, people learn by imitating what they see around them. It is a part of the process of socialization to adopt and adapt to certain roles and behavioral patterns. This learning process begins early in our childhood when we still do not possess the ability to understand right from wrong. The shared beliefs and universally accepted gender roles eventually take the form of stereotypes. These stereotypes become a part of our belief system and influence our growth. The minds of children are impressionable as we know it and such being the case, the identity of children is moulded by the universally shared beliefs of gender roles that are persistent in the society. When kids are exposed to outdated gender roles over and over, it tends to affect their perspective of the world and themselves. The persistent gender stereotypes are circulated in a large number through media, films, advertisements, books, etc. as a part of the dominant ideology.

Nowadays, children are exposed to television and media from quite an early age and there is no doubt that stereotypes hold a pivotal place in the learning process of children by

introducing them to different roles in the society. Needless to say that this also increases the “stereotype threat” (Brannon 159) which is the risk of confirming to the negative stereotypes. Gender is a construct and its process starts quite early through innocent looking acts. Kimberly Walsh, Elfriede Fursich and Bonnie Jefferson point out that, “Patriarchal ideology is so embedded in everyday discourse that it becomes normal to general audiences, and its presence easily goes unnoticed” (126). Children watch their favorite characters and imitate them in their games and play. We often see young girls acting out roles of housewives and mothers, making tea and cleaning, etc. These seemingly innocent and harmless games are actually a part of the gendering process.

Fairytales and especially Disney movies have shared the childhood of millions for quite a long time. It is through them that children, especially young girls get their first peep into the world they are unaware of. This makes it crucial to analyze and monitor the representation of women in these movies. Although we have enjoyed the princess movies generation after generation, there is a need to understand how these movies have evolved presenting a change in the portrayal of gender roles and stereotypes. To understand the portrayal of stereotypes in Disney princess movies, a categorization into four generations will be our guide.

GENERATION	YEAR	MOVIES
□ First generation	1937- 1959	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937) – Snow</li> <li>▪ Cinderella (1950) - Cinderella</li> <li>▪ Sleeping Beauty (1959) – Aurora</li> </ul>
□ Second generation	1989- 1992	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Little Mermaid (1989) – Ariel</li> <li>▪ Beauty and the Beast (1991) - Belle</li> <li>▪ Aladdin (1992) – Jasmine</li> </ul>
□ Third generation	1995- 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Pocahontas (1995) – Pocahontas</li> <li>▪ Mulan (1998) - Mulan</li> <li>▪ The Princess and the Frog (2009) – Tiana</li> </ul>
□ Fourth generation	2012 and later	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Tangled (2010) – Rapunzel</li> <li>▪ Brave (2012) – Merida</li> </ul>

The early Disney princess movies had a typical fairy tale theme presenting women as the weaker sex, the damsels in distress waiting to be rescued by their charming princes. These early princesses are women with unrealistic appearances and are surrounded by gendered objects like mirrors and beautiful dresses. The earliest example is Snow White, the fairest of them all who keeps to domestic work and does nothing much for herself except singing. She enjoys cooking and cleaning for the dwarfs and is naïve enough to eat the poisoned apple. Cinderella again is a servant in her own house and obediently endures all the evil that her step mother puts her through. Snow White and Cinderella do not stand up for themselves and rather keep doing what they are told without questioning. Aurora also falls under this category being very passive, her fate decided just after her birth. Their lives change only when their Prince Charming arrives making him the agent of their happily ever after. But again the Princes fall in love with these princesses only after their beautification and makeover which makes it all the more pathetic. All three of them are flat characters lacking professional ambition, confidence and choice. Their sole aim is to get married and there too they do not get to choose their partner. It is the Princes who fall for their beauty at first sight and save them from their miserable lives. It's important to note that the first generation princesses were designed by males with not even a single woman



working in the Disney studio. Thus, what we see is completely from a male perspective, women in stereotypical roles in a male dominated system. These women are nurturing figures that are too feminine to exist in the real world. Also, they have no identity of their own as their lives are tied to the male figures around them. All that Disney says through the first generation movies is that women are bound to the house where cooking and cleaning is fun, all you need to do is sing.

The second generation princesses show some change in terms of their independence and rebellious nature. By now Disney did have women working alongside men in the industry and we do see change in terms of portrayal of the female. These princesses are not as passive as the ones in the first generation. The curious Ariel rebels and goes against the tide to get the man she loves. Here, we do see a choice made but this choice comes at the cost of sacrifices. First of all, marrying the Prince becomes the utmost goal and Ariel gives up her talent of singing to achieve it. So was Disney trying to say that women should make sacrifices and do whatever it takes for their love? Also, that is not her only sacrifice, as she is the one who has to change her form to a human. Why couldn't it have been the other way around? Undergoing physical change and giving up their talents are big things and we do not want young girls to do this for love however true it might be. Belle, in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) confirms to an ideal form of beauty but is seen seeking emotional fulfillment. She has intellectual interests and shows the ability to see through the handsome patriarch's motives and rather chooses the Beast. Although, her life is still governed by the male figures in her life, first by her father and later by the Beast. Jasmine, the Arabian beauty is a princess by birth. She's adventurous and has a tiger for a pet. A positive sign in the movie is that she defies her father and prefers living her life the way she wants. She prefers the liberty of making her own choices to the luxury of castle life. However, she's objectified when we see her using her sexual powers to distract Jafar- the villain. Also, the happily ever after theme is still tied to marriage which makes it stereotypical.

The third generation princesses show some mentionable improvement. Pocahontas is first among the princesses to rescue the man she loves. She is strong, independent and yet kind and compassionate. Though she falls in love with John Smith, she chooses to stay back with her own people. In 1998, Disney's *Mulan* takes a step ahead and appears defying stereotypical female roles. She is brave and steps up to make changes in her life. She is a positive role model but we see her tied down in duty. Also, all her bravery and strength gets merged with male role that she uses as an undercover. The 2009 movie, *'The Princess and the Frog'*, is a stereotype breaker in two ways. Firstly, it features a dark skinned African American princess named Tiana and secondly for the first time in Disney we see a princess with professional ambition and a dream of her own. She wants a restaurant of her own and works two full time jobs to achieve it. But we do see some stereotypes present in the movie. The third generation princesses are very independent and strong. They desire change and rebel to achieve that change but this change doesn't seem complete. They still have to do their duties as female figures and are not abstained from their roles. In the case of *Mulan* and *Pocahontas*, we feel as though to gain freedom women have to give up their femininity.

In the fourth generation Disney becomes quite feminist starting with the wonderful *Rapunzel*. Her fake Mother almost tangles her in the tower but *Rapunzel* manages to step out the moment she gets the first opportunity. She seeks independence, freedom and light. Fortunately, we do not see any spoilers like love at first sight. Instead, *Rapunzel* takes her time to grow affectionate towards Flynn Rider. Even so, Disney's choice to show Flynn cutting off *Rapunzel's*



hair which makes him her savior, seems quite tangled! Well, Disney does rise to an entirely new level in the 2012 movie 'Brave'. A feminist's delight, this movie shatters all the existing feminine stereotypes and portrays a refreshing new woman of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The most striking element is the uniqueness of plot. It has nothing to do with a romance and doesn't even feature a Prince charming. The plot of the movie revolves around a complex mother- daughter relationship. Merida is a princess but a princess who does not need a prince. She is feisty, skilled and unruly like her flowing red hair. She is a powerful agent of her own destiny and worthy of feminist attention.

Disney has almost never used a female narrator before and this changes in 'Brave'. Merida tells her own story which enables us to understand her dreams and desires in a better way. She is ambitious and has a talent for archery. The scene where she stands up to compete for her own hand is one of the most motivational scenes for young girls. Being a princess, Merida is expected to speak and behave in a certain way but we still see her taking time out for herself to do the things she likes. She rides her horse through the forest and fearlessly climbs mountains and drinks from the Fire falls. Even as Merida introduces herself as the princess – with “duties, responsibilities and expectations” (Brave 0:05:42), she doesn't confirm to her role in any way. She strays away from the traditional ideals of beauty and does not go through any physical transformation. In the end, we see her just as she was in the beginning. The way she dresses, walks, talks or eats, all defy the conventions and stereotype of being a girl, a lady and a princess.

Along with the protagonist Merida, the secondary character- Elinor also appears to be a fully developed character. This is new to Disney, never before have they portrayed such round characters. Another thing worth mentioning is that this movie doesn't portray women in evil roles like the earlier movies where we saw evil step mothers and evil witches. The relationship between the mother and daughter is cautiously dealt. The mother, Elinor appears quite strict when it comes to the princess' lessons. She is a traditional figure in the beginning of the movie but her wisdom and strength of character is noticeable. She keeps nagging Merida telling her that “a princess does not chortle; does not stuff her gob; rises early; is compassionate, patient, cautious, clean. And above all a princess strives for...Well, perfection” (Brave 0:06:30). Though Elinor mentions habits worth nurturing it is not a pretty idea to keep being told how to act and this is why Merida decides to change her mother. She takes hold of her own destiny and even as she messes up she takes responsibility of her actions. We see her singing, “I will fly, chase the wind and touch the sky” (Brave 0:07:34), which portrays her as a free spirit who cannot be pinned down.

Unlike other Disney princesses, Merida does not dream about having a love interest. She defiantly says, “I suppose a princess just does what she is told?” (Brave 0:12:28), when she is asked to marry. She speaks out to her parents telling them that she is not ready and might never be ready. This gives a very positive message that it is ok to not marry, it is ok to choose yourself. Merida is determined and successfully changes her mother in the true sense. In the end we see her taking control of situations and fighting her own father, king Fergus, in order to save her mother. 'Brave' is a breath of fresh air in every way and breaks free from the “stereotype trap” (Begley).

Rigid stereotypes are limits that stifle people and leave no room for growth and change. They narrow down the scope of thinking which ultimately affects the gendering process. Smith, Peiper, Granados and Choueiti point out that, “from a very young age, parents regard many of



the films as 'safe' for young children to view. Psychologically, however, the films may be systematically encouraging youngsters to see the world from a narrow perspective" (783). Thus, it is important to monitor what children are exposed to. The early Disney movies portrayed women as weak, passive and submissive but over the years we see changes in portrayal. Movies like 'Brave' present an opportunity to young girls to view realistic female characters that they can relate to. It shows girls to stand up for what they believe and break the stereotype trap by defying the notion of women as weak and submissive. Merida urges every little girl out there to be her own hero and tells them that, "one's destiny intertwines with many others. It is the one thing that we search for or fight to change" (Brave 0:04:44) and "there are those who say fate is something beyond our command, that destiny is not our own. But I know better. Our fate lives within us. We only have to be brave enough to see it" (Brave 1:24:14).

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